

# A COUNTRY CALENDAR









(C/o J. W. H. H. H.)



Malcolm Humphrey Esq.  
Tabora  
Lynchford Rd.  
Farnborough  
Hants



THE VICARAGE,  
BURPHAM,

ARUNDEL,  
SUSSEX.

July 5. 1928.

Dear Mr. Hemphrey:

I remember you quite well as the writer of a very kind and appreciative letter anent the old "Country Calendar" series in the Daily Chronicle.

You are right in believing the Bodley Head book to be these sketches re-printed. Only I have taken the detached pieces and joined them up into a consecutive story of nature's year—with what success I must leave you to judge.

I shall be very interested to know how the book strikes you as a single piece of work. I should value a ruthlessly candid opinion, and will promise to make good use of it in remedying faults in a second Edition of the book which, I hope, will not be long delayed. The reviews so far have been generally favourable.

Believe me,  
Sincerely yours,

*Pickner Edwards*

*I have migrated to the Daily Express  
now for country work.*

*(Nature Now: by T.E.)  
and have also been moved to this  
Parish from Folkington.*



A COUNTRY CALENDAR





# A COUNTRY CALENDAR

By  
TICKNER EDWARDES

AUTHOR OF  
"THE LORE OF THE HONEY BEE," ETC.



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THE FIRST MONTH  
JANUARY





## THE FIRST MONTH

### JANUARY

Frost music—Dirty weather—The year's morn—"The top of the morning"—Evergreens—The lifting year—Lark song in January—In January woods—"A Winter's Tale"—When east winds blow—Insect life in winter.

A NIGHT of stark, relentless frost and a grey, quiet dawn; and the old river deep in its jungle of yellow reeds, droning invisibly by.

There was no sound of moving water when I first reached the ancient towpath, green with moss and overarched with brambles, where never hoof had rung for a generation back. It was at the top of the tide, and the whole river was encased in ice, an inch thick it might have been. But the tide had turned with the dawn, and soon, out on the open river-way, between the barricades of reeds, the solid floor of crystal began to sag and crack, then to break up into great jagged slivers that reared and turned turtle as they sank. And now the old droning travel-song of the river had begun again in the torpid air, as the current drew steadily seaward, its sullen flow already lower by a yard or more.

I looked back at the still clouded eastern sky. It was no ordinary quest that had drawn me abroad so early on that iron-bound morning. Once before, but once only in all my life, the same happy chances had fallen together—a night of hard frost, high tide at dawn, an hour or two of freezing, grey air, and then brilliant sunshine,



with the expected miracle of music sure to follow. So it had all come to pass again—all but the glowing warmth of sun that was to let loose upon the earth such a melody as nature scarce contrives by any other means. Though the ice upon the open water was long since swept away, that within the reeds was still intact, held up in mid air by the myriad stems—a level of shining crystal making a thin white line in the yellow that could be traced up the river-way for half a mile. Nothing was wanting now but the releasing sunbeams for the ice-bell music to begin.

It came at length just as it had come before. The clouds rent and soared asunder, and the strong sunlight poured through upon the frozen earth. In a little while there was a flash from the dense reed-thicket, as a great glittering triangle of ice broke away from its support and fell, striking the water below with a clear cymbaline note. Another followed, this time a little farther up the river-reach, and then another farther still.

Presently, with the ever-mounting sun, the flakes of crystal began to fall, no longer singly but in twos and threes together, none alike in size, so that the music was for ever running up and down the scale, pealing out in wondrously subtle harmonies, growing soft or strangely loud in turn as the sun chanced to dislodge the resonant fragments far or near. At last the whole river-way rang to a wild, sweet strain such as one may rarely hear, and treasure in memory, yet never credibly tell the half of its utter wildness and sweetness.

For a long hour, the close-knit, sturdy reeds poured out their syren-music on the sunny air. Even when the last clear, silvery note seemed to



have come and gone, and there was nothing left but the old interminable ripple-song of gliding waters, every breath of wind that chanced to steal across the river-flats found in the sunless deeps of the reeds still another bell to chime.

Those who habitually lie late of winter mornings often lose what amounts to a real compensation, a complete set-off of benignity, to days even of the dirtiest weather. So frequently a day that proves unutterably bad, in the traditional sense, has the fairest beginning; and there goes with us through the long dreary hours such a memory of beauty that its worst malevolences are robbed of harm.

Days of raging winter wind begin often in crystal-clear serenity—a white, still dawn, silent but for a single bird-voice ringing afar off in the misty wood. The white morning looks forth under a brow of heavy scowling black, and great dark clouds squat along the earth-line, inert, full-fed, ominous. But all is so still, and the growing light of such a silvery purity of promise, that one goes abroad ready almost to sing for joy with the solitary bird.

Then—in a moment, it seems, and springing up from nowhere—the wind is tearing the tree-tops and moaning round the eaves. Little fearsome eddies of dead leaves dance at the village corners. The black cloud-brow to eastward shuts down, and the light goes out. All day long the northwest wind raids the world with ceaseless charge and counter-charge of thunderous cavalry under a leaden sky. But in every pause of the gale we can hear the thrush still valorously singing. The

darkest hour yet holds for us its saving memory of silver dawning light.

Days of relentless, drenching rain and gloom are perhaps hardest to bear, of all forms of dirty weather in the barren wintertime. And yet such days nearly always begin with some index of infinite beauty, never to be forgotten: some rare and fleeting, yet unequivocal expression of ultra-human hope and thought.

As I sit writing now, close under the old dim pattering bulls-eye panes, with hardly light enough to see—though the hour is verging on towards noon—it is not the dismal weeping day that lives for me, but its lurid and lovely beginning.

I saw the muffled winter darkness change to a star-gemmed dawn: rich night-blue overhead, the pure colour failing and fading beneath until it merged into the snow-white glittering eastern wall. But what I could not yet see, so delicate and tender of touch had been its pencilling, was the screen of pale cloud-ripples with which the whole heaven was secretly overspread. It was scarce more obvious to an unexpectant eye than writing in invisible ink.

Wavering, watery ripples they were, an endless array of them; yet so fine and so translucent that I should never have guessed their presence but for the final and informing stroke now swiftly dealt to the picture by the Master Hand. The sun never showed himself; the rain had whelmed the whole world in drab within a few short minutes.

But just for an instant one broad, splendid crimson ray shot up from the earth-line, like acid thrown upon the ink; and every ripple above was



suddenly rimmed with tense fire—a Niagara of burning roses quenched in a moment by the deluge of the winter rain.

Though, in the shade of the hedgerow, every blade of grass is still white with frost, all sign of it has vanished from the open field. The turf, wonderfully fresh and green under its thick coverlid of waterdrops, glitters and glows in the resplendent morning sun with a thousand rainbow hues, the rich colours for ever changing as the drops run together, until each grass-bent droops under the weight of a single scintillating crystal suspended at its tip.

And just as the untrammelled morning sunshine has turned the whole meadow into one vast coruscating avalanche of gems, so the light seems to have set free in the encircling woodlands a flood of bird-song indescribably full and sweet.

The thrushes lead the major contribution to this symphony—rippling, joyous cascades from the song-thrushes, and a steady chorus from the missels that makes up in volume what it lacks in timbre. But the robins and whinnying tits and twinkling chaffinches are almost as ubiquitous.

The robins' clear undulating song fills in all the pauses in the general rondolade, and whenever an actual break comes in this bright cresting surface of the morning's music, the ear goes down gratefully into the deeps—the soft, low crooning of wood-doves, and crafty guttural of the magpies, and distant organ-clamour from innumerable rooks.

Only the blackbird seems able to resist the lure of the sunshine on this first magnificent morning

of New Year's promise, after the long wintry spell of gloom and rain.

Of course there has been the usual crop of letters to the journals telling of blackbird-song heard indisputably all the winter through. But these testimonies must be received with diffidence, even with incredulity.

When, in wintry days, the King Merle overcomes, or momentarily forgets, his traditional silent pose, and breaks out his spinnaker of incomparable melody, there can be no question about the song. It can come from only one throat. In quality, ceaseless variation of phrase, and that effect producible by what can alone be described as conscious artistry, the blackbird stands easily first among our native singing birds.

If he were to tune up this moment, in the midst of all the jubilation of bird-song ringing the old meadow about under the January sun, there could not be an instant's real doubt as to the identity of the singer. But the truth, as all country-dwellers know, is that, in certain of his least exalted moods, the blackbird has a close, almost a slavish, imitator. The missel-thrush's monotonous refrain—of a desperate sameness alike in shine or storm, mild or rigorous times—is readily to be mistaken by an inattentive ear for an odd fragment of the blackbird's tuneful minstrelsy.

Long before sunrise, the robins were singing in the garden, and the sparrows chippering merrily in the ivy under the eaves. In the oak wood behind the little thatched mushroom dwelling, a thrush had been piping ever since the first silver thread of dawn wavered in the eastern sky, and



innumerable wrens were busy far and near with their quiet, blithe, twittering music—a tiny, inconsiderable rill of sweet notes underlying all the rest, and filling all the pauses in between.

Coming out into the deserted village street on such a warm, still January morning, just as the first clear sunbeam shoots across the housetops—a broad level scarf of dusty, dusky gold slung from hill to hill—you cannot but be forced back to the old wondering thought: how it is possible for anyone to live in the country for long, without coming to disbelieve altogether in winter as a season of dearth and death.

Go where you will on such a morning, you are met at every turn of the way with plain refutation of the ancient theory. Overhead, in the wooded lane, the beeches are full of brown spearhead buds, waiting, seemingly, but for the first strong day of sunshine to unfurl them into green leaf. The horse-chestnut buds stand up erect in the morning light, brilliant and glistening with new sap. The hazels are crowded with catkins, some of them a full inch long already.

The wayside banks under the hedgerows teem with new green life—fresh young sprays of crane's bill and bedstraw, and stinging-nettle; whorls of jagged dandelion leaves, with here and there a yellow tassel of bloom opening in their midst; groundsel almost in full flower—a glint of white dead-nettle in a favoured corner—one blue eye of veronica wide open in a still more sheltered nook.

And the wanton beauty of the mosses and lichens must be seen to be believed. All moss and lichen life is nearing the supreme vigour of its growth at this time. The rich gem-like verdure

of the mosses lends an opulence to the grasses of every pasture, and spreads its living emerald over every woodland track.

The lichens on the tree-trunks are weaving new year's patterns of grey and green and gold—delicate laminae of one pure quiet colour upon the other; exquisite seashell-like forms grouped together and endlessly reproduced as flowers in a garden bed, and all softly aglow and instinct with their weird uncanny life drawing its sustenance, it would seem, entirely from the air. Here is an old flint wall smothered with bright-hued lichens, and giving back the level morning sunlight in such a glory of colour as makes the eye flinch and turn for alleviation to the dun-brown earth below.

In the bright winter sunshine the evergreen trees and shrubs of the hedgerow stand out in bold relief among their deciduous fellows.

The light is absorbed and lost in the maze of bare twigs and branches of hawthorn, elder, briar. But privet and yew and holly stop and throw back the level beams in a thousand generous hues of life. The great sprawling bramble-bushes intercept every ray with their curtains of dappled green. The ivy, enveloping the tree-trunks overhead, not only catches and holds the winter sunlight, but it draws down to itself the colour of the sky; its uppermost glossy leaves have a soft blue sheen upon them, much like the bloom on ripe sloes. This reflecting, reduplicating power of evergreen growths in sunshine lends sparkle and life to the dreariest stretch of the sodden way.

What the countryside owes in winter to the unfailing verdure of these plants is scarcely to be



overestimated. To move abroad finding fresh living greenery wherever one goes, is to forget the winter, and be perpetually reminded of the imminence of spring. The plants that carry their leaves only in summertime are but fair-weather friends. Ivy and holly, fir and bramble, spreading their richly sombre growth amidst the winter frosts and snows—these are the true stand-by of hard times.

Never is the gorse so cheering and companionable as now, when it clothes itself in a myriad needles of green, with a yellow-winged blossom poised on every prickly spray. For the gorse is not only ever green, it is ever gold. Save for a week or two in the sultriest heats of summer, there is hardly a day of the year when its flowers cannot be found in plenty. In late January now, one can come upon whole bushes smothered in golden bloom shining from afar like flame.

But the chiefest and cheeriest of evergreen growths is the common grass of field and wayside. Leaves may come and leaves may go, but the common grass of the wayside goes on for ever. So that it have air and light and a little moisture, its greenness is perennial, unvarying, inevitable.

All the so-called evergreens have a period in each year when their greenness is but a name. Every true leaf has a definite limit to its life, whether it be borne by deciduous tree or by holly, bramble, or needle-leafed pine. It is the nature of all leaves to decay and fall at some time or other; and we look upon ivy and holly as evergreen plants only because their leaves are shed piecemeal and out of the common season.

But the wonder of the evergreen grass-blade is

that it has no seasonal decay and fall. Every blade is just a green ribbon flowing ceaselessly up from the earth. Cattle browse upon it; rabbits nibble it away; the winter frosts and scorching heats of summer brown it at the tip. But its fountain of green life springs eternally below, and so there is always the common grass year in and year out, green and gladdening for ever. We know of oaks and yews traditionally hundreds of years old, but who shall tell the age of the common grass of the fields?

So that you live near an oak wood, you need no calendar to tell that the winter has passed its nadir and the New Year's life is already strong on the wing.

But a week ago, the whole wood was carpeted with rich sienna of fallen leaves, burning up into tiger-stripes of pure orange, where the sunlight struck across the winding glades. To-day the leaves have all vanished, as if by magic; the crowding tree-trunks stand upon an unbroken plane of green—thick, matted ivy-growth, with the freshness and sparkle of spring already upon it, each shining leaf a looking-glass for the new risen sun.

It is no magic indeed. The dead oak-leaves are still there, deep down under the glittering coverlid of the ivy. But wind and rain of past days and nights have beaten them to earth, while leaving untouched the supple, upstanding ivy-sprays. Look where you will, nothing of the brown December pall of cast foliage remains in the woodland deep.

In the hazel copse there is just as sure a token



of the lengthening hours. December's sombre purple is gone from the maze of slender boughs. Everywhere the catkins are swelling and drawing out, their grey-green winter dress taking to itself a delicate rose—the very colour of rejuvenation. Leaf-buds and female flower-buds show full and round and intensely green. Millions of swelling buds and lengthening catkins, catching the morning sun, overcome the purple of the stems, and bring to the wood a mistiness that is a real foreshadowing of April days.

On the downs, for many a week to come, the wind will dictate the season. Winter, or spring, or even a fitful precious moment of pure summer, is January's tale, according as the wind blows west or east.

But nothing can hold back the blossoming of the gorse on these first days of the sun's turning. Icy blast, or iron frost, or grey rain-torrent; shadow or shine—it is all one to the hardy gorse. It goes doggedly on with its joyous New Year's alchemy.

To-day, the south-west wind came up warm and free with the amber dawn, and all day long the great cloud-shadows have been chasing each other over hill and dale of sun-steeped green.

It has been a day of tolling sheep-bells and carolling larks; grey hours and golden hours, and ever the song and buffeting strength of the wind. All that can be seen and felt on any day in winter. But not the living gold of the gorse-brakes, as they glow up now like sudden beacon fires, and blot out again as swiftly, when the great cloud-argosies drive across the sun, every stitch set to the breeze.

To-day the downland lark began his New Year's song. Not the brief, disjointed strain of winter—the sudden music cast recklessly aloft into the frozen silence or whistling hubbub of the northern blast, when the bird breaks cover almost from under your very feet, and cuts a swift tangent slantwise upon the wind, singing valorously as he goes. Not that, which is over in a moment, song and lightning sweep upward ending together but a fathom or two overhead, the lark dropping like a black stone silently to the safe shelter of earth again.

But this is his veritable New Year's song, with the leisurely blitheness of spring in it—the song that begins with his first wing-beat and lifts in a wide spiral of music, getting higher and higher with every moment, the little fluttering atom of joy and energy creating an atmosphere of soft tranquil melody as he soars.

But even now, when the south wind scumbles hill and dell with violet haze, and the noontide sun strikes hot on your cheek, though it is only January, the lark does not attempt too high a flight. Watching him as he mounts steadily upward, you soon get dazzled with the pure light and lose him altogether. But you know he is still soaring, for ever the song quietens as it recedes into the blue. There comes a moment at last when a change dawns in the music. It has grown suddenly louder and clearer. The singer has turned, and is coming down again, not by the winding aerial stair that took him aloft, but straight down now, swift and true as the falling stone; yet ever carolling as he falls.

The lark's spring flight, brief though it is,



moves to music from beginning to end. The glad song ripples on to the very moment the singer touches earth, going out then suddenly as the flame of a torch cast into water. If you wait a minute or two he will be up again, telling the same blithe tale to the mist-veiled skies, and all the morning through while the sunbeams last. But there is no need to tarry; he is only one of a thousand. You can trudge on mile after mile over these rolling Sussex highlands, and have your fill of lark-music every step of the way.

Lark-song above, and ever the quiet voice of the wind about your feet. The sound of the wind on the downs is always close to earth—a sobbing cadence in the dry grass-bents, or a low, slow, rhythmic note in the furze brakes islanding the greensward everywhere, a sound curiously like the murmur of summer seas.

To-day only the lightest zephyr breathes from the south. Down in the valley not a twig in the highest tree-top moved in the calm morning light. The smoke went straight up from the cottage chimneys. But on the downs there is always moving, living air; and now, as you halt a while in one of the deep sunny bays of the gorse thicket, the soft voice of it creeps in your ears like the lilt of low-tide ripples on a summer shore.

To shut the eyes a moment is wondrously to favour the illusion. The hot sun pouring on the uplifted face, overhead an unceasing carillon of larks, and close to the feet this strangely sweet, insistent murmur, lifting and falling; it needs but the crying of ocean-birds and a sharp salt fragrance in the air to bring back all a lifetime's memories of summer holidays spent by the sea.

As I drew nigh to the clearing in the heart of the wood, a green woodpecker got up from the bracken and went looping off out of sight amid the crowding trees.

Seen from the rear, his dull tarnished jerkin was scarce visible in the attenuated light. But he turned in mid-air just before he disappeared. And then his yellow rump and gold-green flanks made quite a gleam of colour for the moment. A little while after, he started rapping among the old trees below the hill, trying first one and then another—a sharp, dry monotonous sound going off at intervals like a minute-gun; almost the only clear, differentiable note that would vex the stillness of the woodland clearing all the dim, grey, windless morning through.

But the quiet in the deep wood itself was very far from being silence. This arid, pointed noise of the yaffle's business, continually breaking upon the ear, threw all other sounds into a sort of unregarded background while it lasted.

It is strange how deserted the woods seemed, as my tread first crisped and crackled in the dry bracken of their shadowy glades, and how full of life and sound they are now. Hardly a moment goes by but some small bird flits across the path from bush to bush. The maze of dark branches overhead—of a thousand shades of green and brown and purple, really, but all bewitched into a coal-black retina against the sky—this is pervaded with quiet twitterings and incessant scurryings of wings. Long-tailed tits drift in little companies from tree-top to tree-top playing like kittens as they go. Whinnying oxeyes swing themselves about giddily from twig to twig, and the



soft note of bluetits—only to be described as a sort of musical kiss—creeps in the ear at every turn.

The chaffinches love the woodland deeps on these mild, still winter mornings. Their cheery call-note follows the wanderer from end to end of the wood, and the warm break in the frosty weather has brought the first authentic token of spring with it—the chaffinch's resumption of true song.

This bubbling lay of the chaffinch, commonly regarded as a mere string of bright notes, unvarying alike in number and vehemence of delivery, is nevertheless the only song of wild bird that marks indubitably winter's approaching end.

The English winter is actually but a two-month season; November, with its sky-load of ruddy leafage, belongs of right to autumn; and no one with eyes and ears could place February's ever-growing music, and elms thick with purple blossom, among the winter months of dearth and death. But it is the chaffinch alone who first heralds the truth of all this. To-day he has begun to waft his silver bubbles up into the mild quiet air of wood and field. Floating bubbles alone as yet. When they come audibly to earth—when the song finishes with the still missing final triplet of plashing sound—then and not till then, spring's heyday will be here.

Though the flock was so far away that the drifting sheep looked only like dots on the green hillside, the clamour of the bells and the shepherd boy's lusty song came over to me strangely loud and clear on the slow, keen air.

It could scarcely be called wind, for this breezy country; yet wandering over the lonely, silent sweep of downland under the inky pall of

sky, the air had so chill a touch that I was forced to keep briskly moving. Only when I reached the great gorse-brake at the head of the combe, and got deep into one of its sheltering bays, could I halt with any comfort. But then it was pleasant and cosy enough. The biting wind fell like a shot bird. It still kept up its weird, dirge-like note in the thicket behind me, but the dense, matted billows of gorse cresting overhead, had suddenly robbed it of all power to harm.

I shared my gold-draped nook with a cloud of tiny midges that would have been instantly wafted to perdition out on the bare upland. Dewdrops hung trembling from all the grass-blades round my feet—intensely brilliant points of silver-white that would have been shaken to earth at their first gathering, had the chill flood of wintry air but an instant's chance with them. A rabbit scuttled off at my earliest approach, racing away to cover in the next gorse-patch; and a pair of magpies did the same, filling the black sky with incessant sardonic chuckles until sound and sight of them were lost altogether over the far crest of the hill.

Dark, hurrying heaven above, with scarce more light in it than the sad green gloom of interminable hill and hollow beneath. Solitude, and a sense of banishment from the warm hub-heart of the world, that one only gets on these downs in winter, or in the midst of fathomless, trackless seas, where a white fleck of top-gallant, or stain of smoke on the horizon is a whole week's prime event.

And yet, content and enduring pleasure of life, bestowed on every sense, for all it be but a moment's good paid for by the hour-long journey out and



home through the whistling icy air. The cheery fellowship of the midges idly playing about my ears : squandered gold of gorse, all but taking the place of sunshine—not a green, prickly spray in view but was loaded with yellow butterfly-forms, each again burdening the still air with a fragrance sickly-sweet; the dirge of the harmless wind behind and around me; the far-off clamour of the sheep-bells; and, sweeter, more uplifting than all, the voice of the shepherd boy, the fresh young voice pealing out above all other sounds in the desolate morning; careless, jolly; full of a childlike, unthinking, unstudied heart's-content.

Through the woodland break at the edge of the steep, you look out over hill and dale of darkling arable to the far-off line of ghostly, glimmering sea.

The plough-teams are out and busy on the shrouded upland; you can count half a dozen of them, near and far; the ploughmen's lusty voices and merry jingling of the harness drift over to you faintly on the slow-moving air. But the wind, what there is of it, comes from the fateful east.

All the life and lustre, all the rich aerial blues, that belong to western weather, have vanished from the landscape. Everything is grey and dour to the far horizon. Even the clouds of gulls circling and crying in the wake of every plough, look dreary, cold.

At these times, when the east wind impels its cheerless, sombre mood upon all the countryside, turning the sky into a leaden pall and the woods into blotches of ink, the eye unconsciously enhances the value of the minutest scraps of colour that chance by the way.



The lichens on the tree-trunks, grey and unmarked in sunny weather, now stand out with a living, arresting green. The red on a robin's breast, as he flits across the field of view, has all the warning brightness of a danger signal. Between the stones of the path, the little gold-green moss-tufts that you have so often trodden unseeing, glitter underfoot now like gems.

And every time the glance returns to these things, after wandering a while over the drab upland and leaden sky, their value is redoubled. The crimson of this bramble-leaf, suspended by the way, has ceased to be mere colour and turned into a tongue of quivering flame.

It is the same with the sounds of the countryside as with its colours, when the east wind blows. Though the robin keeps up his uneasy journeying to and fro, he is mute, save for a faint half-hearted trill or two. A day or two ago, when the south wind still held, the thrushes sang all day long, and the little oxeyes were conning over some of their most winsome notes—see-saw music that belongs of right to April.

But to-day the thrush gave up within an hour of dawn, and the tits are as silent as they are invisible. A jay calls harshly, the scornful chatter of a magpie breaks out now and again in the woodland deep. A yaffle tries his bill once or twice on some decaying branch—a muffled, hopeless sound. The wind sighs, and droops, and sighs again.

The day is out of heart, and all things with it—all things, that is to say, other than human, or linked up with the human scheme. For the voices of the ploughmen urging their smoking

teams, come over to you cheery and stalwart as ever. The harness goes on with its merry tune. And now, from the hidden dell below you, there lifts something that is the very presentment of joyousness.

The hedge-trimmers have been at work there since daybreak, and now they are burning their clippings. Over against the dark hillside there rises a solid column of wood-smoke that spreads out at once into gargantuan billows; wave beyond wave of pure radiant cobalt-blue, startling in its sheer intensity of colour—such a blue, you think to yourself gratefully, as might put an Italian lake in summertime to shame.

And for those unaccustomed to woodland walks so early in the year, the abundance of insect-life abroad during these mild breaks in the frosty weather, is always an astonishing thing.

At every sunny corner in the green glades there are clouds of midges filling the air with tiny silver flashes from their myriad wings. The extent of the spider population alive and alert at this time can be gauged by looking across the hazels against the sun, when every purple wand will be seen to be cabled and girdered to its fellows in all directions by lines of gleaming spider-silk.

During the sunniest hours there is often the rich, soft hum of bees upon the air, and you are puzzled to know what a hive-bee can be doing in a wood in wintertime until you see one drink at a dewdrop, then rise and soar away straight for home.

But it is after dark, when the woodland tracks are haunted by a ghostly company of little pale-winged moths, that the woods can be most profitably visited.



These moths, indeed, have been flying the whole winter through, whenever the nights were warm and still enough. Where they get to during the really cold spells is something of a mystery. Probably they lie up in the crevices of the lichened bark of trees, or hide in the deep carpet of fallen leaves, or shelter amidst the tangle of ivy and couch-grass underlying every wayside bush.

As you thread the woodland way by the light of a lantern, something that you think can only be a falling leaf comes sidling and swaying into view. In a moment it passes outside the dim yellow circle of light, but as swiftly returns, this time rising as well as falling.

Once or twice the moth comes so close to the lantern that you even mark the colour of its wings—ochre, with a lurid ruddy tinge in it like dying fire. This is one of the larger moths of winter-time, and one of the most plentiful. You come upon them at every turn of the path, if the night be really warm. And the curious thing about them is that they appear to be wholly indifferent to the light you carry.

There is a small and paler moth plentifully abroad at this time, which blunders against the lantern in the traditional way of all night-flying insects. But this dusky fire-winged moth, if not actually blind, shows no sort of recognition of the light. It will wander casually across the zone of illumination from darkness to darkness, and back again as unconcernedly; or, turning away, will sail steadily off down the yellow beam as upon a river of light until you lose it altogether in the gloom of the wood.



THE SECOND MONTH  
FEBRUARY





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"It is February"—February in the woods—The look-out post—The Shepherd's Warning—Frost and bird song—The north-east wind—Spring on the downs—Elm blossom—Bee life in February—Downland larks—The old enemy—The cry in the night.

**I**T is February. A chill grey dawn no longer silences the birds. Cold or warm, rain or shine, the day starts with the same glad medley of woodland music: song-thrush and missel, wren and robin, contending jubilantly together, so that there is an almost unbroken stream of rich sound flowing over the awakening world.

Sooner or later, too—sometimes before the light is strong enough to reveal his identity to the eye—a blackbird starts tuning up in the spinney beyond the garden-close. It always seems as if, by common consent, the other song-birds quietened their intermingled strains directly the blackbird starts in with his peerless recitative, just as the opera-chorus is subdued to a mere undertow of sound when the prima donna takes the stage.

All through the day the clear mellow warble will break in, time and again, upon the general woodland theme, and for the moment you will listen to nothing else. It may be the last note that stills with the last fading amber glimmer of evening—you may carry its serene slow sweetness with you into the Land o' Nod, and weave it

like magic thread of gold into your dreams of spring.

It is February, and the hazel woods are hanging out their new green gossamer robes to dry in the sun and hurrying freshets of western wind. In this steep hillside wood, how many millions of new-blown catkins are there, dangling now in the breeze, to give the wood its present radiant illusion of verdure—a fresh greenness of life nothing like the greenness of new spring leaves, but just, as it were, vivid emerald-green sunlight turned suddenly full upon the maze of sombre wintry twig and stem?

And, on a nearer vision, these wonderful hazel woods of February are seen to be full of light of a wholly different colour. Here and there amidst the crowding lamb's-tails there shines up a speck of burning crimson, a tiny torch of intense crimson flame, that fairly dazzles the eye, for all its minuteness. And now you come to divine the reason for all this eager shimmering and shaking-out of green tresses in the new spring sunlight and urging western breeze. Until the night-dews are dried out of the downy catkins, they cannot shed their fertilising pollen-dust upon the living rubies below.

The October nut-harvest wholly depends upon the temper of the weather in these and the succeeding weeks. If cool, moist, sunless times prevail, the frilled brown nuts that should stud the hazel branches in the autumn ready for the rooks and village children and squirrels, will be few and far between. But there is little fear of that on present showing. Wield your stick anywhere now among the catkin-laden boughs



as you thread the narrow woodland path, and see how, with every blow, you send a little green cloud of dust soaring away into the dim labyrinth of the wood.

In the dripping quiet of the hazel wood the robin's song rings out strangely sweet and clear.

Yesterday, on the soft, sunny spring morning, the thrushes were paramount in the wood. Their glad symphony easily overbore the robins' tender diffident refrain. But you can never count on the song-thrushes. To-day, though it seems perfect singing weather for any wild birds loving the warm times, their careless rippling music is curiously absent. The robins have the sousing morning almost to themselves.

If you have any lingering remnant of belief in that palpable fiction—of it being still winter when February is here—you have but to take the path through the hazel copse on any such warm cascading morning as this. The winter purple of the bare hazel wands has entirely gone, and the whole wood is clad in a living green. Other woods don their spring garment of verdure by easy stages, and by a process that is yet scarce in sight of beginning.

The new hazel-leaves indeed are still only in the promise of swelling bud. But the full-grown catkins are here by the thousand thousand. Every bush is laden with their gold-green light, each catkin a little pendant streak of intense colour, and all slanting the one way in the gentle air, so that, as you press on down the winding path, there seem to be two kinds of rain falling about you—the relentless grey torrent from the weeping heaven, and a magic rain of emerald light.

The ceaseless rondolade of redbreasts' song, and the living green of the hazels; and now, in one of the dimmest corners of the wood, you come unawares upon a sight that serves to drive the very thought of winter back, as it were, into remotest ages. The great oaks that here and there stretch their gaunt bare branches over the wilderness of hazel stand each on a little patch of shining cloth-of-gold. The aconites are in full flower—tiny globes of yellow, each poised on the top of a ragged umbrella of fresh young leaves. But the new foliage is almost lost under the sheen of the blossom, and its vivid hue sobered by the grey of the clinging rain. Only the tight-closed yellow flowers seem to ward off the waterdrops and gather to themselves all the light that filters through.

But there is a more potent sign still that winter is over and the spring getting into its lordly, high-striding mood. Southward, the hazel copse ends abruptly at the steep bank by the river, and here, in a little sheltered nook, where every sunbeam of the day is caught and held, a whole garden has sprung up amidst the pale chalk rubble of the river's brink. It is gold again, but of a different mintage. The gleaming amber stars of the colts-foot are set so closely side by side that, from a distance, they swamp the white glare of the chalk altogether with their runlets and pools of gold.

And in the deep bay on the verge of the wood, open to the whole day's sunshine, spring ever gets a first sure foothold long before she is able to wander abroad in the open lanes and fields.

Though the rough, yet kindly, south-west wind



is surging in the tree-tops behind, and driving a flustered rabble of cloud-forms helter-skelter before it over the blue sky, here in the sunny hollow there is scarce enough air to swing the hazel catkins that fill the walls of the deep curving bay with thousands of tiny tangents of gold-green light. The fresh bright colour of the catkins in the untrammelled midday sun is past all belief. It is not mere colour; it is a dazzling glory—pure sunshine turned into glowing emeralds whose myriad facets give back not only their own intrinsic hue, but the sunshine's living tincture of gold.

To this light-riddled, sheltered nook come always the first flowers of spring.

Already there is blue-eyed veronica shining in the dew-soaked grass that hems in its winding moss-grown ways; and primroses lurk under the greening bramble-brakes—not single furtive blossoms cowering timorously here and there amongst the dead bracken, as one sees in the open clearings now, but bold upstanding flowers half a dozen together, making a glow of sulphur light wherever one looks. Tufts of silver chervil lift a foot or more above the grass, and pink and white dead-nettles bejewel the way at every step. The little crimson-tipped daisies throng the beaten track—one can hardly help treading on them. Broad discs of golden dandelion show like dropt moldores amidst the green.

When the wind is up and doing blusterously, all insect-life vanishes from open country; but here in the sun-steeped cleft of woodland the still air is alive with the glint of tiny wings.

At every turn of the path you brush through a

cloud of dancing gnats. Now and then an old familiar note falls upon the ear, as a hive-bee lifts from the crowding grass-bents underfoot, and soars away singing into the blue. There is no doubt of her destination; you can follow her with the eye through the sunny air, going straight in the direction of the village.

It is a comfortable thought that the hive-bees know of this flowery nook, and are already garnering its early sweets. But, of a truth, it is not nectar for the honey-brewing that bees seek on these first spring-like days in February. Though there is flower-shine enough in the little favoured nook, the time for sweet-gathering is not yet.

These wandering bees are out for water alone. In the open the fierce wind and sun together soon dry up the morning dews, or drive them to thirsty earth. But in the sheltered corners February dew lies late, and the wise honey-bee knows where to look for it.

Red skies in the morning do not invariably foretell rain. The misty, water-logged red that comes with earliest break of dawn, suffusing the whole heaven in a lurid, swampy radiance, yet vanishing with the first direct sunbeam, is often the herald of a cloudless day.

The true red that goes before rain is nearly always late in coming, and the last thing it suggests to an unobservant eye is the imminence of wet weather. The morning breaks crystal-clear—a sky of wonderful, almost uncanny purity and depth of blue behind a trellis of troubled grey; an infinity of dapples, and flecks, and sagging,



wavering cloud-lines covering the whole eastward view right up to the zenith; yet all touched in tenderly, delicately, as with the finest sable-point held in a master's hand.

And then the red that means rain—the true “Shepherd's Warning”—may come in either of two ways. Perhaps in a moment, as it seems, when a great and angry light breaks up from below, as if the door of some raging fiery furnace of the underworld had been thrown open; when the whole wide fan-tracery of eastward cloud lights up into a griddle of ruddy flame, and hill and dale beneath it are swept with a sudden smoulder of crimson. Or it may come by imperceptible degrees—earth-line and endless reiteration of grey cloud slowly changing into one vast shining rose garden, where every blossom is a clear-cut jewel set in enamel of a richer, deeper blue and more crystalline texture than ever.

But whether sudden or slow, the real portent in the red of morning skies depends on this excessive clarity of atmosphere, or the reverse, which accompanies it. The ruddiest sunrise, so that it be misty and far-off, and the earth below reluctant to let go the grizzly hues of night, may well turn to day-long brilliance. But a red morning that draws down to the hills—hills sharp-defined and seemingly scarce at an arm's stretch, and all set beneath a blue translucent and pure as molten amethyst—has the very sound of the rain already in its slow, inconstant breath. In a little while an ominous array of cloud-tops begins to peer over the horizon wall, and it may well be that you never see the sun, for all the lurid signs of its coming. The long cloud-bank

steadily lifts and overspreads the sky. The wind is crying in the tree-tops, and the first swift scatter of the torrent is on the pane.

In summertime wet weather has little power to silence the birds, but, thus early, a drenching morning is often a silent one, or at least its music brought down to a single jolly yet monotonous refrain. Leaning from the casement now, under the pouring eaves, you can distinguish only the one voice far and near—the missel-thrushes calling to each other across the rain-blurred valley. It is a wild, unrecking sort of song, with little of artistry and less of real tunefulness in it. But you soon learn to love the storm-cock for his invincible optimism, in and out of season. He just keeps the sopping February morning on the hither side of gloom.

Around the village next morning the cocks were crowing long before the first amber tinge of coming day showed in the east, and while the stars were still bright in the blue wall of the western sky.

It was a beautiful sound, very serene and clear and a little awe-inspiring, as I looked out from the cottage window and watched the silent frost-bound darkness slowly yielding to the coming day. I waited for the song-thrushes to begin in the wood hard by, and the missels to follow a moment later with their bold, insistent clarion, as they have done on every warm free morning of late, with perhaps a phrase or two of blackbird music afterwards, as the first level sunbeam thrust through the pine-clad sierra of the eastward hill. But no other note of bird broke the radiant stillness.



This soft mysterious symphony of cockcrow journeyed the round of the village minute after minute until broad day glittered upon everything, and the white thatches began to steam on their sunny sides, and here and there from a cottage chimney a plume of blue wood-smoke lifted into the torpid golden air.

And then at last another and a deeper sound grew into the shimmering quietude of the morning. Dim and far off at first, it soon developed into a mighty clamour as a great army of rooks swept by overhead, darkening the blue with their close-packed throng; there were hundreds of them, it seemed, all calling to each other as they went and making straight for the high-lying arable lands among the hills.

As they passed over the village the sound of their going attained a surprising volume—a babel of rich, husky, sonorous tones blent with an interminable yelping chorus, like a pack of hounds in full cry. But it was all over in a moment or two. Black streaming host and resounding travel-song died away together in the far distance. The risen sun was already hot on the face, and though the robins were awake and carolling in every spinney, the thrushes held mute as ever.

These brief returns of wintry times in the midst of the ardours of mounting February always strangely silence the thrushes. It is past midday now, and not one has ventured a note all the sun-flooded morning through.

Every time the north-east wind begins to blow the advancing spring seems to drop and take cover, like storming troops in the open when the guns get on their range.

All colour vanishes from the landscape. The blue sky is hidden by a pall of desolate grey. The violet blots out from the distant hills. Wood and field take on a dismal miasma of gloom. The trees turn black as ink. The river, stemming sullenly on between its barricades of last year's reeds, might be a river of lead. In a moment the world seems back again into dreary, drab December.

The thing to do on a walk in the country at these times of seeming retrogression is to shun all extended views, and let eye and ear busy themselves only with the minutiae of the season.

Though the tree-tops look sombre and lifeless enough against the frowning heaven, seen one upon the other from the midst of the wood, they reveal a beautiful mirage of richly contrasted hues. The elms are already thick with purpling bud, the ashes full of black velvet bobbins threading the wilderness of smoke-grey stems, oak and beech are laden to the skies with knots and spearheads of tawny brown.

In the copses, the blackthorns are covered with tiny burgeons that soon will show a flush of rosy life, and in a few short weeks will be breaking into snowy crests of blossom down every laneside and over the hedgerows bordering every field. The service-trees are showing leaves already an inch long, and elder and honeysuckle are bursting everywhere into fresh green spray. Down in the grass below a hundred different growths are springing into new life—herb-robert and cinquefoil, bedstraw and ground-ivy, wild parsley, daisy, coltsfoot, dandelion—all things that, with the return of the warm south-western airs, will be



spangling the laneside verges of March with living silver and gold.

Through the carpet of dead brown leaves underfoot the dog's-mercury is throwing up a myriad leafy hands, each holding a bunch of tendrils like clustered strings of beads. But the primroses give the dominant and indomitable note to the scene. One can scarce move without treading on their dense whorls of fresh young foliage all closely intermingled with gleaming sulphur buds—thousands upon thousands of them in the vast clearing, with here and there already a full-blown flower. Half a day's real spring weather would spread the whole hillside with shining cloth-of-gold.

Below in the village, song-thrush and robin and missel poured forth a steady torrent of glad sound upon the sunny air. But as you drew up the steep chalk lane that led to the downs, this ringing chorus gradually failed, until at last you could detect only one clear note very faint and far behind you—the call of a missel-thrush perched on the highest branch of the churchyard elms.

This last token of the lowland-haunting birds died away as you gained the summit of the green shoalback hill and began to descend into the wide combe beyond. Suddenly you seemed to have plunged into a great silence. An unbroken arc of blue above, and limitless array of rolling hill and dale still white with the night-frost, yet a whiteness that was breaking everywhere into cascades of iridescent waterdrops and letting the rich colour of the grass heave through in waves of glowing emerald under the hot morning sun.

And yet, even on these windless February

mornings, there is no real silence on the downs. The ear soon gets tuned to their quiet key, and by little and little, as your steady stride brings you into the heart of their green solitudes, you begin to wonder at all you hear.

Spring is coming, up amongst these white-capped highland wastes, as surely as in the warm, tree-cumbered valleys, yet without their disturbing stress and sense of change. The downland larks have been singing all the winter through as they are singing now. But to-day the song is quieter because the singers are higher in the blue. The old brief furtive snatches of music are gone, and now you may listen to a single unhalting cadence for three or four minutes at a stretch.

Yet to divide the song of one lark from another at this season needs a keen and accustomed ear. The silence that seemed to fall about you as you came over the green barrier of hilltop, reveals itself now as just a firmament of lark-song remote as the frail shadowy cloud-forms shaped like beckoning hands that dim the farthestmost blue.

On the South Downs, though mid-February is past, sheep-bell music still mingles with this unceasing ripple of lark-song, and the new spring call of the peewits. The lambing-yards down at the home farms are beginning to fill, and the surrounding pens already contain their close-packed throngs of forward ewes.

Albeit the main part of each flock still spends the day browsing among the hills, and the soft slow chime of the bells comes over to you unremittingly on the calm morning air. In a week or two at most, this perambulating symphony will draw to an end, and the last ewe be safely folded



close to the lambing-yard to wait the fulfilling of her days.

There will come a time when you will trudge over these hills in the sunniest, most songful weather, yet with a vague undefinable sense of loss. And then, perhaps on some wind-wild March morning, will come rehabilitation in the sweetest downland note of all the year—the glad clamour of ewes and lambs together, blent with the familiar age-long tolling of the bells.

Though one may have witnessed the coming of blossom-time to the elms every February for a score of years, it never comes but as a surprise.

A week ago the great trees flanking the roadside showed the same bare attenuation of branch and twig as all their fellows of the woodland. But a few more days of temperate western air have wrought an almost startling change in the prospect. Now the elms stand up against the grey, quiet sky nearly as thick with purple blossom as they will be with green leaves in June.

Elm-trees in full flower under sunshine are gorgeous enough; but the sun lifts the whole countryside into a universal splendour, and the glow of the elm-blossom is only one radiant zone among many—the force of contrast is lost. But on this dim, quiet morning the elms alone draw the glance. Looking up the grove from the valley, the eye is led from crest to crest until it stops baffled against a towering cliff of crimson—rich, imperious colour smouldering against the grey, still heaven with all the sullen, solemn beauty of dying fire.

And as the elm-blossom came, so it will go.

Its lurid purple will block the skies while February lasts. And then the colour will suddenly vanish. The tree-tops will clear and lighten. A steady rain of green will begin to fall—an infinity of tiny verdant spangles sifting delicately down day and night until all the woodland ways are covered as with emerald foam. Later, this flotsam and jetsam—the cast sepals of the flowers—will change its hue to tawny brown, and the March winds will pile it up in the corners like drifts of rusty snow.

Then this astonishing tree will have a further wonder to reveal. As it donned its royal garb, beginning with purple crown, then flowing robes, and finally sandals of the same rich hue, now it takes to itself its summer drapery of green foliage on the inverse plan.

First its great bole bursts into minute green leaf. The tiers of slender branches, standing out here and there from the rugged stem, light up one by one with the same glow of sappy life. The lowermost boughs are reached and lost in the rising tide of new colour. Presently you see the elm-tops thickening again, and the first few days of April sunshine will see all their dark framework lost in an ever-gathering mist of green.

And yet, for all its beauty—perhaps because its beauty is wellnigh its only use—the elm is a doomed tree in England. Year by year the numbers of giant elms in the country steadily diminish, and none are planted in their stead. Other forest-trees are safe from extinction, whether we plant them or not, for they will always perpetuate their kind from chance seedlings. But the elm never seeds.



Perhaps this rising generation will be the last to know the loveliness of elm-blossom flooding the whole countryside with living purple in early spring.

All the bright, still morning through, the bees have been stampeding to and fro between the hives and the blossoming elm-trees in the lane, each bringing home a double load of pollen attached to her thighs, the lumps of pale grey matter, most of them so big and heavy that the bee can scarce drag them into the hive. Surely to-day this is the busiest spot in the village—the old bee-garden.

Now and again as you watch, one comes tumbling down out of the blue sky with her panniers full of pollen-like beads of shining gold, proving that she has been prospecting by the riverside and has chanced upon an early tuft of willow-bloom. Already the willows are crowded with bursting buds; in a week or two, if the warm bright weather holds, they will be in full flower; and then the sunny air above the garden will be one vast chute down which the willow-gold will pour all day long as into a king's treasury.

These first real strenuous days of work for the bees in late February reveal to the watcher many curious things. Though there is ever this winged multitude lancing out and home, frantically intent on the hives' provisioning, there are many other worker-bees who find more than enough to do at home.

The broad, sloping threshold of each hive is covered with a busy throng, every bee engaged on some particular enterprise. Obviously there is a

sort of general spring-cleaning in progress. Countless small scraps of rubbish are being dragged out and tumbled over the edge of the alighting-board; the ground below is littered with a fine drift of yellow atoms for a yard away from each hive.

All the combs within are being cleaned up and got ready for the coming season's work, the rims of the brood-cells strengthened with wax, the winter accumulation of debris on the hive floor scavenged out, dead bees borne forth on the shoulders of those who fulfil the office of undertakers to the community.

The dead bees, however, are never left in the vicinity of a healthy hive. All other useless or unwanted matter is merely cast away clear of the entrance. But the dead are carried off to safe sanitary distance: you can see the undertaker-bee flying straight away through the sunlight with her gruesome burthen, perchance towards some burial-place long traditional with the race.

But perhaps the most interesting thing now to be witnessed in the bee-garden is the first resumption of the unique ventilatory system practised by the hives. Already, for an hour or so at the warmest time of the day, you can see half a dozen bees or more anchored in a row in open order with their heads towards the hive entrance, all vigorously fanning their wings. The effect of this is to draw the vitiated air from the hive; and in the height of summer the whole flight-board may be covered with these ventilating bees, creating together an outward current of air strong enough—as may be easily proved—to extinguish a candle-flame.



Away in the deep downland combe, lying between one great shoalback hill and another, there is no sound upon the still air but the song of the larks.

Down in the village, when I left it under the first clear sun-glow of the morning, the birds were singing with an amazing force and sweetness: song-thrush and missel-thrush, robin and wren and chaffinch, starling and dunnoek, all uniting their music in one rippling cascade of sound. But as I climbed the steep lane to the downs, one by one the glad voices were left behind. Standing now in the wide green hollow amidst the hills, miles away from any human settlement, there is nothing but lark-song above and below.

It is only in solitary treeless spaces, such as these high-lying wastes of the Sussex downs, that one gets to know anything of the skylark and his true ways. In the lowlands he is never visible but as a flickering black speck against the sky, or dropping like a stone to earth, where he is at once swallowed up by the rank herbage of the fields. But here on the crisp short downland turf, his whole life, alow and aloft, is open to scrutiny, and one soon finds out many unexpected things about him.

That the skylark sings at times when perching or resting on the ground is known to all who consistently watch the wild life of the countryside. In these early days, brief stanzas of the song can often be heard lifting from earth, and the bird seen swelling his throat and bristling his crest behind some grass-tussock or even when making his favourite swift scurry from one green ridge to another. But it is not this alternation of venue

in song which chiefly impresses an observer of skylark ways at this season. It is the extraordinary numbers of these birds congregating on the downs at the present time, and the gay companionableness of the life they lead.

To-day, the green solitary combe seems full of larks. On every hand, in the still sunlight, the gleam of their wings is incessant. They are like a bevy of children just let out of school; running to and fro and pirouetting in the air two and three together; darting off a while in long ascending tangents up into the blue sky, carolling as they go; or chasing one another from crest to crest of the greensward just clear of the surface with all the sure intrepidity of hunting swallows.

But comparison with the flight of other birds, perhaps almost without exception, is stultified by any near study of the skill and power of the skylark on the wing. Especially it is the skylark's faculty for intricate swift manœuvre at close quarters that most excites the wonder. Now and then a couple of them will lift into the air and describe together a sort of intertwined whirling double-spiral, whose velocity baffles the keenest eye—probably a first ebullition of the great spring love-rivalry that is to build for the coming April days their firmament of song.

In country houses, on these warm, still February evenings, as one sits reading or writing by lamplight, the quiet of the room is sure to be broken sooner or later by a shrill sound going to and fro in the air—the high, fine wavering note of a mosquito, perhaps two or three together, restlessly voyaging about.



These early mosquitoes are nearly always specimens of the true malaria-carrying anopheline gnat, which, contrary to the general belief, is one of the commonest of British species. There are about twenty kinds of biting gnats which pass with us under the common name of mosquito, and all hibernate in some form or other.

Of the three British malaria-gnats, only the spot-winged variety—by far the commonest of all—seems to pass the winter invariably as perfect insect, and of these the gravid females alone survive. They hang up in the dark corners of cottage rooms, and especially the cobwebbed ceilings of stables and outhouses, any dim, neglected nook where the besom is not likely to disturb them—the little company that is shrilling about your room is nearly certain to be composed entirely of spot-winged anophelines roused from their winter retirement by the new warmth of the February night, and frantically bent on securing the blood-draught now necessary, not so much for their own sustenance as for the development of the eggs that in a few short weeks they will be laying on the sedgy waters of some neighbouring pond or sluggish stream.

These mosquito-eggs are well worth the trouble of looking for and should be sought among the half-submerged grasses close under the banks. The eggs of the malaria-gnat are dropped upon the water singly—tiny, black, elongated objects, like minute oat-grains—that immediately join themselves together tip to tip or side by side in all manner of curious and intricate geometrical patterns, often covering a square inch or more of the water surface with a fine dark network

whose quaint fanciful beauty must be seen to be realised.

This adhesion and interlocking of the eggs serves to prevent their being scattered by the violence of the mimic storms that assail their resting-places every time the wind blows or the rain beats down, where otherwise they might be carried into mid-stream and become an easy prey to the first hungry stickleback that happens by. But even then, these wonderful eggs of the malaria-mosquito have every chance of survival for their mysterious work of plaguing humankind. Each is fashioned exactly like a lifeboat, upcurved prow and stern, double side-floats, and all—it is practically impossible to swamp and sink them by the most vigorous splashing. Every year millions of malaria-carrying mosquitoes are bred in this country, and though the terrible scourge of malaria is almost extinct among us, it is only the vigilance of our sanitarians that holds the menace at nought.

Later, in the stillness of the starlit night a brown wood-owl came calling over the village, so near at length that I roused and went to the window in the hope of a glimpse of him. But though the hollow wild note seemed to pass and repass continually within a yard or two, and now and again the dull reverberation of his flight was plainly audible, he kept so craftily within cover of the trees that nothing of him was ever to be seen. As he wheeled invisibly to and fro, filling the grey dark with his hollow melody, his mate in the distant woodland answered him cry for cry. He drew off at last, and I listened until the two voices met afar off in equal strength, dwindling



away at last together into the silence of the hills.

Then a sort of strangled, bubbling note sounded up in the churchyard, and I knew the old barn-owl that lives in the tower was also on the wing. He, too, made the circle of the village, but farther afield; not drawing a trail of weird song behind him in the manner of the wood-owl, but, as it were, blazing the aerial track here and there with shrill catches of stifled melody as he sped. Hardly had he started on his tour of the meadows, when the little brown owls, the "Frenchies," began in the gardens round about. There is nothing owl-like in their strident note. It is just a medley of harsh, jangling tones, each bird calling apparently for his own content, with none of the deliberate, companionable give-and-take so characteristic of the larger owls. But the hubbub goes as abruptly as it comes. One minute the gardens rang with the sharp, fierce note, and the next there seemed no living creature stirring under the whole mute starlit heaven.

That was the moment chosen for the first uplifting of a voice which, to the life-long dweller in a sheep-farming country, is perhaps the sweetest of all sounds of spring. It came from the hillside over against the village, where the shepherds have been building their new lambing-yard this fortnight back—the first cry of the first new-born lamb, a long-drawn-out, yammering note lifting into the starshine, almost humanlike in its telling plaint of helplessness and need.

For though, according to the old South Down tradition, the earliest lambs are not due in the world until Saint Valentine's Day, there are

always one or two in every flock who declare for the great adventure of life well before the allotted time. In a few weeks from now the vast yellow straw-castle of a lambing-pen upon the hill will be filled with crying lambs and their vociferously anxious mothers, and no one in the village will be able to sleep at nights.



THE THIRD MONTH  
MARCH





## THE THIRD MONTH

### MARCH

The blackthorn winter—March music—Blackbird and missel-thrush—Skylark and woodlark—The march of spring—Our primrose woods—Spring under water—Palm blossom—Yellow bees in willow bloom—The north wind—The return of the redshank—"Land of Hope and Glory"—Mavis music—Lambing time—Gloaming.

**M**ARCH, with its chill, grey days alternating with days of genial, sunny warmth and calm, gives to the year's advance an illusion of discontinuity.

The spring seems to come by fits and starts. When the sun shines, and the warm west wind harps in the tree-tops, and all the distant hills are afloat in violet haze, one seems to be standing breast-high in a swift, onrushing torrent of new light and life. But the wind chops round to the north, and in a single night all is changed. A nipping air keens under a drab and sullen heaven. The glad, day-long ripple of bird-song dies down to a few whimpering, fearsome notes. Looking away over the dim receding mist of meadows to the far-off woods, all seems black and lifeless as a winter's day.

At these times it is good to turn away from this apparent general retrogression of things, and let the eye keep to nearer aspects—judge the current of the year's progress by the straws that ever move steadily with it, rather than by the back-driving ruffles born of contrary winds. The

blackthorn blossom is one of the most comforting stand-bys for a dull chill day. All the lanes are full of it now. The hedgerows are lighting up fast with its sweet, starry inflorescence and myriad opening buds. From the first, the blackthorn has taken no count of ups and downs of weather. Warmth or cold, rain or shine, it has been pushing unconcernedly forward to its final grand display. In a week or two the hedges bordering every field and lane will be hung far and near with garlands of snowy blackthorn bloom like so many waiting brides.

And then, if another cold snap intervene, people will go about buttoned up and shivering, telling each other that it was only to be expected; the blackthorn blossom always brings winter back again. Belief in the sure recurrence of this so-called "Blackthorn Winter" has become an article of faith with nearly all rural folk. And yet it is based wholly upon a falsity—a strange misreading of the traditions come down from ancient times.

The phrase, Blackthorn Winter, had its origin really in a poetic fancy, such as was common enough in the old rich-visioned illiterate ages of the English countryside—a supposed resemblance of the full-flowered thorn-bushes to growths laden with snow. It had nothing to do with any untimely recrudescence of wintry weather at the season of the blackthorn's fairest perfection, even if that were a tradition borne out by the fact. As like as not, when the blackthorns have reached the zenith of their bridal beauty, the chill north wind will return, and the wealth of snowy blossom may be hidden under real snow. But that will



be a mere mischance, rare enough, as any attentive observation carried over many years will easily prove. Yet the inconsistency, if it come, must be reckoned to the weather's, never to the blackthorn's, charge. Every year, in spring's unfailing calendar, the first blackthorn flower comes true to the week, almost to the day, of its appointed time.

A rose-red dawn; yet with all the soft, pure colour low in the cloudless western sky, and only the merest slur of daffodil in the brightening east—what poet has ever dared to flout convention by putting such a sunrise into rhyme?

And yet that was nature's way this still March morning. As I went over the frosty meadow, bruising a footprint trail of vivid emerald into the silvery white, my shadow stretched a full hundred feet before me; not a grey shadow as at broad day, but one intensely blue with the rich royal blue drawn down from the crystalline sky above; and on either side of this ever lengthening, receding track of azure, lay a glistening plane of hoar-frost warmed here and there with a ruddy fleck from the west.

The rich red light held until the lifting sun had cleared the wood-top, and swamped the world in molten gold. The spring morning seemed to come at last suddenly, like the breaking of flood-gates of light. The dawn was not the beginning of the day, but only an ineffectual alien thing swiftly superseded, and now forgotten as the strong March sun boarded the earth and put the lingering wintry frost to the knife.

It is on such a morning that one begins to

hear strange notes in wood and field. It is not that new songs have already come to the awakening countryside, but that the old songs change; the old accustomed musicians of field and wayside turn new pages of the score. Most of the chaffinches still keep on with their truncated winter melody—the clear run of silver notes with the little final flurry of bright sound, typical of summer, as yet left out. But to-day the chaffinches' full measure of music has been ringing in every hedgerow, and the yellow-hammers have been drawing out their wheezy sweetness almost to the wonted length of summer days.

All the common singing-birds are showing in their music this authentic trait of March. Longer and longer with every day sounds the ring-dove's crooning note in the quiet and stillness of the budding wood. The blackbird often sings now for an hour on end; not the single desultory warble that one hears in warm, bright breaks of February, but the sustained leisurely symphony running on with scarce a pause half the sun-steeped morning through.

But the most arresting note of these ever-mounting March days is one that comes from the little song-thrush, though many would be ready to deny its true source, so curiously at variance is it with the common trend of the thrush's lay. Right in the midst of his liveliest, most careless stanzas, he falls into a plaintive, pensive mood. And then, sweet and low and slow, comes this astonishing sound that at once recalls something you have not heard these nine months back—the famous "keening" part of the song of the nightingale.



There has been no doubt about the blackbird for a week past. He has been singing, rain or shine, at every evening's close. And now he is just beginning to tune up with each dawn, a steady, tranquil flow of clean-stopped notes as from the lower register of a great concert flute.

It is by three almost unique traits that one infallibly singles out the blackbird's music from the rest.

By its quality, first of all. There is no other voice of bird with just the same deep, mellow serenity of tone; once familiarly known, it can never be confused with songs of lesser worth.

And then, by its easy, effortless power. Its rich, deliberate contralto, once the blackbird starts into the nightly symphony it wrests the major rôle from all other birds, pour forth as lusty a measure as they may.

And, supremely, by its musician's skill—its verve, attack, its wise employment of cesura and refrain, its unending variformity, its deft use of telling reticence and interval. The blackbird is no mere songster, but an accomplished instrumentalist. In this trait alone he stands apart from all other wild birds, not even excepting the nightingale.

In quality and power the nightingale is unapproachable in her way. The purity and forceful sweetness of her few notes outrival even those of the blackbird in his finest fettle. But the nightingale is just a singing bird, and not a very proficient one at that: the blackbird plays upon an instrument of priceless worth with finished, delicate art.

Listening to him now, in the golden, stormy

tag-end of a day that has been all song and sun and driving rain from its first red unravelling, you wonder how it could be possible for anyone familiar with his matchless artistry to bring to it a moment's doubt.

The missel-thrush's vapid, undulating song, so frequently mistaken for early blackbird music, ranks indeed almost the last among songs of English wild birds. It has a certain resemblance to a single one of the blackbird's least exalted strains—a sort of half-hearted desultory tuning-up in which he sometimes indulges—sufficient perhaps to account for, if scarce to excuse, the common error. But there comparison lags hopelessly behind. The missel has but the one wavering, monotonous quatrain of notes, though he seems ever trying to make up by industry what he lacks in quality and power.

His is a case of desperate attempt to justify undeserved reputation. To read some of the old text-book eulogies on the missel-thrush's song is indeed inevitably to wonder if the same bird can possibly be meant.

And then there is the woodlark's song, which, now beginning in those odd, shy nooks of tree-encompassed meadow or heathland so capriciously favoured by the bird, is seldom recognised by any but habitual dwellers amidst country scenes. All songs of the air are commonly set down to the skylark, if indeed the chance wanderer in remote rural districts even knows that there is more than one English wild bird with the romantic and deeply mysterious habit of scaling the blue ethereal heights when the impulse for music-making seizes him.



But the little woodlark, though it is classed by the text-books among the rarer British birds, may often be heard from the beginning of March towards high summer, and again in the earliest days of autumn right through to the first winter frosts. And probably, if the song were diligently sought by one familiar with it, there would be found scarce a mild, bright interval in all the winter but had its woodlark music tempering the more forceful, more rollicking chorus of the skylarks with its quicker, sweeter strain.

The song is just a rich, subdued flow of mellow notes that have a peculiar penchant towards running together into phrases, some of these often curiously reminiscent of the songs of other small birds. It is distinguishable from the skylark's song mainly by this variable trait, and the fact that, though smaller and quieter, it is on all occasions more continuous.

Another characteristic of the woodlark is the habit traditionally ascribed to it of remaining aloft on summer nights singing continuously, sometimes for hours together. There are many old and experienced students of bird-life who confirm this ancient reputation of the woodlark, but many more still, equally credible, who deny it as an unsubstantiated legend. This variance in testimony is probably due—like so many other confusions of opinion in matters relating to wild life—to the very local character of the bird, both in incidence and habits.

In this south-eastern county, the little brown woodlark, with his stumpy tail and rather bat-like, flickering method of flight, is by no means a common bird; and, after dark, I have heard him

singing but once in a lifetime. But down in the West Country, there appears to be no doubt of him as a serenader. Going abroad one still summer night in quest of nightingales, I stood for a long hour under the star-gemmed blue, listening spellbound to a harmony of such unearthly sweetness, and so remote, that it seemed to come from the very stars themselves.

To watch day by day the progress of life and green growth in wood and field, and to miss nothing of moment, is a task that sooner or later baffles the keenest and most diligent of eyes and ears.

Every day, almost every hour now, seems to bring something new. This grey dim March morning after the tearing south-western gale, the most conspicuous change is in the buds on the blackthorn, each full and green now and pointing for white flower, where a few days back the crowding stems showed only buds a quarter the size, and of a tender rose-red hue—just a minute coral-like incrustation thickening the maze of sombre twigs.

By the gate that leads to the wood the sloe has decked itself over with silver blossom and unfurling green leaf. The honeysuckle that entwines everything above and below in the wood forms running lines and chains of new growth; knots and tassels of vivid green that make the green of the hazel-catkins look already stagy and old. The elders have almost done with spring. A week of the mounting March sunshine has brought them out into a wealth of verdure that is scarce believable, though one stands in the



midst of them noting how the green gloom typical of summer woodlands already colours the ground beneath.

Grey and dim and surpassingly still the morning seems after the termagant south-western gale. You come out of the wood and stand a moment on the brink of the steep hillside looking out over the water-meadows and watching the peewits at their ceaseless aerial dance. Here again is something different from yesterday—the new queer tumbling manœuvre in mid-air, and ringing urgent quality in the plover's peevish self-compassionate refrain, that belong of right only to the heyday of the mating season.

And now a chaffinch, sitting in the budding hawthorn hard by suddenly gives over his eternal twink-twinking and breaks into his full summer song. The chaffinches have been singing for weeks past, but their pell-mell music has always stopped short of the final hurried carillon of sweet notes. Now the song is poured out again and again to its very end—the merry bubbling song that seems set in the hedgerows as counter-foil to nightingale sadness. At the sound, the bush where the minstrel hides himself grows, in fancy, white with the promise of May.

You no longer have to peer about for primroses as you thread the woodland ways, glad here and there to detect a pale star glimmering amidst the brown litter of last year's leaves. The russet floor of the wood has gone, hidden under the new green carpet of dog's-mercury; and the thought of March primroses as solitary lights twinkling in a waste of darkness is forgotten,

much as you lose the conception of single sunbeams in the glow of high noon.

It is an all but universal light now, this of the primroses. Where there were single blooms only a few days back, now there are hundreds; not indeed massed together and overriding everything, as in April, but flowing away on all sides in a mottled attenuated pattern of softly-shining sulphur, reminding you strangely of the yeasty ocean-foam that marbles the green valleys between sea and sea.

In the sunny woodland clearing the primroses crowd so thick upon the path that one can scarce move without crushing them under the tread. Almost as plentiful are the white anemones, every blossom stealthily quivering, though hardly a breath stirs in their sun-flooded retreat. The bluebells, too, are beginning to lift their curving spires of azure here and there high above all other woodland flowers, and trailing ground-ivy wantons everywhere, decking the old grey beech-stoles with knots and festoons of purple light.

But the primroses easily outshine all the rest. As far as the sight can penetrate between the crowding stems, the whole wood is floored with their pale sulphur yellow, marked here and there with a dash of living, burning gold, where a clear beam of sunshine has thrust itself down through the maze of budding twigs.

Every springtime the village children come to this wood to gather primroses. The wood, which dwells in such profound green solitude all the rest of the year, has seldom a day now without its stooping forms and murmur of human voices. And yet, of all the many primrose gatherers, how



many really know the full beauty and mystery of this queen of woodland flowers?

For, besides the beauty, there is a mystery about the primrose. Though very few ever notice the fact, there are two distinct kinds of wild primroses growing indiscriminately together in every wood. Take any bunch picked at random and, examining it closely, you will not be long in remarking a very curious thing. While some flowers have their central tubes closed by a little feathery whorl of pale yellow, just as many more show the tube quite open, except that a slender shaft topped by a translucent green globe, stands just within.

But this is not all. If you pull a flower of each sort apart, you will make another discovery. The two forms of primroses do not really differ. They are the same flower. It is only a matter of inversion of parts. The primroses with their mouths closed by the feathery tuft have the lance with the green knob upon it inside the hollow shaft, though wholly out of reach and view; while those from whose open mouths the globe-tipped lance protrudes are also furnished with the cluster of pale yellow anthers, but these are enclosed and out of sight beneath.

This strange dual provision in the primrose of the apparatus for fertilisation has long puzzled many, and the true explanation of it is probably still to be sought. The suggestion that it is an ingenious arrangement whereby all kinds and sizes of insects are rendered available in the work of fertilisation will not hold in the face of one yet more curious fact. Look about you now in the primrose wood, where there is an incessant,

drowsy murmur of bees all round you, and you will not see a single bee visit the yellow primrose blooms.

They are scrambling everywhere in the white anemone flowers, and the bluebells, and the purple ground-ivy. But the whole world of insect-life seems to leave the primroses severely to themselves. This, however, is not entirely so. The primroses are fertilised by insect agency, but, as far as naturalists can discover, by one creature alone.

Wandering in the woods on any sunny morning, you are pretty sure to come across this creature—the Primrose Sprite, as he is fancifully called by the little circle of nature-lovers in southern England, among whom the writer is glad to claim fellowship. He is a bright-brown fluffy fly, not unlike a bumble-bee, except that he has a long and conspicuous proboscis which he carries before him much as an elephant carries his trunk. You are sure to notice him by his shrill and busy hum, and his habit of hovering in mid-air just over the primrose, into the depths of whose tube he will presently thrust his long spear up to the hilt for a moment, and then dart busily away to the next flower. And, as far as is known, the primroses depend for their fertilisation entirely upon this single, winged, furry atom.

But why should the primroses present these two distinct forms of internal construction, when their purpose seems to be the attraction of only one creature in all the throng? The question sounds natural enough; and yet, as all close observers of wild life know, it is against the spirit of nature to expect to trace in any one form or



process a single purpose alone, or indeed, any direct utilitarian purpose.

If the flower of a plant existed solely to attract fertilising insects, a daub of strong-odoured sweets on a spot of white were all that would be necessary to bring them to the feast. Materially, vegetable life would be just as useful to animal life if only one plain form of inflorescence had been created, instead of the myriad forms that now crowd every field and laneside and woodland view. You cannot explain the existence of beauty in the world on the score of utility without arraiging the whole scheme of squandered loveliness in colour and scent, and intricate design, and endlessly varied music, flowing breast-high to our very doors to-day.

And so it were but ungrateful folly to wonder overmuch at the existence of two kinds of primroses shining in the fresh woods when one would seem to be enough. It is all one to the Primrose Sprite. But to the Infinite Mind there is no such number as One.

Deep between banks shining with gold of celandine, the stream winds invisibly by. So quiet and slow is the crystal-clear water that, even when kneeling amidst the soft flower-gemmed verdure of the bank and peering down into its glassy depths, one cannot make sure by sight or hearing that the water moves at all. Only the long green wavering fronds of weed anchored to the bottom, all slant one way, revealing the trend of the current.

The bright March morning is full of tokens of the year's reawakening life, but nowhere more

bountifully than in the sunken deeps of the stream.

Every moment a gleaming silver bubble breaks away and rises through the crystal water, showing where some long-embedded, hibernating creature is rousing and getting ready for its coming summer life on wings. The ferny jungle of submerged growth that flanks this central open way is full of sticklebacks, the males already gay with their breeding colours, scarlet and green and pale sea-blue—a fainter echo of the kingfisher's plumage, the little swift-winged, creaking-voiced bird that, a moment ago, drew a streak of emerald fire across the stream.

These tiny freshwater fish with their brilliant seasonal colours and formidable array of dorsal spines, must not be confounded with the minnows, which are true river fish, never seen in these lilliputian waters. The minnow is just a sliver of living silver, mild and timorous of nature, seldom met with but when heading upstream safely with its kind. The stickleback, which only haunts inland threads of water, the smaller streams and running ditches, leads a sturdy, aggressive, independent life, ever at war with its fellows—one of the fiercest, most pugnacious creatures, perhaps, in all the wilds.

Looking down now into the pellucid water, one can see the male sticklebacks, each lurking within his own green-shadowed fastness in the dense thicket of weed, or cruising about in the open sunlit way, obviously spoiling for a fight. When two meet, there is first the slow, crafty manœuvring for place of vantage, and then, of a sudden, a perfect whirligig of onslaught and



counter-charge, until one, beaten at length, breaks away, and flees for shelter to his own shadowy den.

But, for all his love of strife, the male stickle-back is really the most domesticated of creatures. The female seems to do little else but lay eggs, and that only under sheer compulsion. It is the male alone who builds the nest and drives his reluctant mate into it, keeping her there until she has done her duty; and the male solely it is who hatches the eggs and fends for the young.

There is no whiteness to be compared with the intense white lustre of the willow-buds sunlit against the blue morning sky.

The path follows the riverside, with the pollard willows on the one hand crowding down to the water's edge, and on the other, the hazel copse full of green lamb's-tails, all slanting the one way on the soft March breeze.

Beyond the hazels the elm wood rears its towering cliff of purple blossom against the azure of the far-off hills. And beyond the hills great clouds stoop along the horizon in a shadowy legion, their sunny sides white as driven snow. But there is nothing I know or can conceive of with which to compare the whiteness of the new buds on the willows, stretching their myriad slender stems aloft against the blue in the pure vernal light, each stem threadled thick with the bursting cocoons that seem made of glittering silver wire infinitely fine.

These are the half-open male flowers of the willow, and it has been good to watch them develop through these last days of generous

warmth and light. First a row of full brown buds close-set alternately up every stem, and then each bud unfolding at its apex and letting a softly shining pearl slip through—a veritable pearl at the beginning, but changing almost within the hour to a tuft of pure floss-silk.

Another day's sun, and each silken cocoon has broadened and lengthened until it all but touches its fellow next above on the string. Yet another day and the cocoons have doubled their girth and taken to themselves a mysterious tender flush of green deep down under their silken coats—the hidden, chilly glow-worm radiance that is the secret of their intense and utter whiteness; and every stem is covered at last from end to end with one continuous glitter—the whole tree looks like a wide-meshed trammel made out of knotted silver cords, indescribably soft, yet brilliant against the blue.

And to-morrow's sun will see another, bewildering change—each cocoon flaring up into yellow, and doubling its size in a single morning. Already the rich colour flames here and there amidst the silver. A few more days of unclouded sunlight and all the whiteness will be gone. The river will flow through an arcade of golden blossom to the song of countless golden bees.

Yet the song will not be greatest where the sheen of the willows is of brightest hue. It is from these trees bearing the brilliant male-catkins of the willow that the hives draw their chief supplies of early pollen. But the famous willow-honey comes almost wholly from the female—the pistil-bearing trees. There are nearly as many of them thronging the riverside, but the



female willow-catkins, at their ripest, only dress the tree in sober, inconspicuous green.

The buds are smaller, and the silk-sheathed cocoons are full of wan colour from the very first—a sad sage-green hue that ends by swamping out the whiteness of the silk altogether. One never sees the female willow until one is brought wonderingly to a halt beneath it by reason of the resounding music overhead.

Drowsing and dreaming by through its thicket of reeds and overshadowing glory of willow-bloom, the river is a voice and nothing more. You hear the wash of the current driving steadily, strongly, seaward; and now and then an eddy fills up with a note like the sudden clang of a silver bell. But you cannot get a glimpse of the hurrying stream—here from the green, flower-gemmed river-path—peer as intently as you will. The jungle of yellow-grey reeds and the gold-tressed willows, crowding down to the water's edge, shut all from the view.

But there comes to the riverside at this season a richer, fuller song than any due to the brimming river's flow. The mountains of golden willow-bloom have drawn to themselves seemingly every winged atom of the countryside—hive-bees by the thousand, great black and amber-bodied bumbles, blueflies and butterflies, humming gnats and midges, every flying creature born in time to share in this first nectar banquet of the spring.

For once, there will be full-flowered "palm" branches in plenty for the churches this favourable year. Yet there will be country folk rejoicing to-morrow who never think of Palm Sunday in

connection with an early willow blossoming time. To all bee-keepers, the coming of the willow-bloom in abundance means an end to foreboding as to the welfare of their hives.

Exceptionally mild winters, such as the one now happily over, are a doubtful blessing to all country interests, but especially to that of honey-craft. Cold weather keeps the bees seasonably dormant, lying snugly together in the cosy cluster, when they need only the barest minimum of food. But continually recurrent spells of warmth, luring the bees out to fly, rapidly deplete the winter provender.

For weeks past, the bee-men of the villages have been eking out the natural stores of their hives by administration of sugar syrup, some of the old-fashioned ones making it of beer instead of water, giving it to the bees in troughs fashioned out of split elder wands, and pushing these through the hive-doors stealthily by night. All have been anxiously watching for the first great loads of yellow willow-pollen to be brought home by the early foraging bees, and now the golden tide has set in doughtily at last.

Looking across from the bee-garden towards the river this sunny noontide, you could see a faint misty level in the air—thousands of bees passing back and forth over the same narrow aerial road.

There are many early pollen-bearing plants which provide food for the hives, but practically only one—the yellow-cocooned goat-willow—which gives solid food and nourishing drink as well. Yet it is not the so-called palm-willow, the male tree of the species carrying the loads



of golden blossom, from which the nectar is derived. This comes almost entirely from the female willow, which bears but a lean and dingy inflorescence, albeit making up in attractiveness of scent what it lacks in hue.

Coming over the grey upland in the teeth of the northern gale, every step of the way had to be fought for, grimly, determinedly, with head lowered and body bent to the blast.

Yet here, in the deep wood, there is scarce a breath stirring. The mighty torrent of ice-cold, ice-pure air storms harmlessly by overhead. The tree-tops send down a wild stentorian bellow. But only the gentlest zephyr fans the cheek, here on the steep hillside looking away through the trellis of lichened stems over greening copse and chequer-board of meadow and cornland to the far-off glittering line of southern sea.

To be lying, comfortable and warm, on an ivy bank, with primroses and violets scenting the air about me, and a quiet ripple of wild birds' song far and near, would have been an unthinkable possibility a while ago. But on these resounding, blustering days of winter, that come like sudden guerrilla raids against the advancing host of spring, it is no good to hug by the fireside, blenching at the roar of the wind in the chimney and the rattle of the hail on the pane. In the true country, at the weather's worst, there are always serenity, shelter, even warmth, to be found out-of-doors by those who know where to seek for them.

And the deep heart of the woodland is made for such days as these—for fugitive man, as well as

for timorous wild thing. I stretch at my ease in the warm soft ivy-growth, still a little blown after the long tussle against the wind. A wren is singing in the brambles hard by, the song an amazing volume of sound for so small a creature. Robin and missel-thrush, great-tits, linnets, chaffinches, all add their notes to the general quiet symphony.

The larks were singing every foot of the way across the desolate upland, and there is one at her music-making now, high over the meadow beneath the wood—during an instant's lull of the blast her sweet pure voice peals out and is silenced again by the swiftly recurring roar in the tree-tops, as though one had suddenly opened and closed the door of a concert-hall.

The north wind ever brings with it a drab and lowering sky—a ceaseless array of dun clouds careering before the gale in helpless, reckless velocity. Cloudland at these times has none of the piled-up, toppling immensity of form that one sees with heavy south-western weather. The clouds that charge by all day long on the northern blast are little more than inchoate masses, separate, yet ever overlapping and parting again, so that seldom a minute goes by without the blink of a merry blue eye somewhere in the sombre canopy or a spot of gold leaping from hill-top to hill-top below.

These solitary zones of sunlight wandering, here and there over the grey face of earth, are really the peculiar sign-manual of the north wind. When the south-wester blows, it is under a blue firmament strewn with driving cloud-packs; the world below is a sun-steeped plain over which



the grey cloud-shadows sweep. But with the north wind, the world is a grey world searched here and there by travelling beams of sunshine. It is not the shadow that moves, but the light.

Over the water-meadows comes a new sound to-day—the shrill, yet softly plaintive, whistle of the redshanks, who have come back at last to their old breeding-quarters among the sedges and glittering pools of the riverside meads.

The redshank, with his bright, neat plumage of white and grey, and pipe-stems of legs of a ruddy orange dangling beneath him as he flies, is an object that arrests the glance the moment he lifts out of the crowd of dingier-coated birds—green plovers, rooks, jackdaws and the like—that, in March, haunt these riverside flats.

But it is not so much the sight of him, as he flits ceaselessly from spot to spot, dutifully followed by his mate, that brings the step to such a wondering halt. The spring-call—it might almost be described as a song—of the redshank is like nothing else on earth. Penetrating, yet never loud; high-pitched, yet of an extraordinarily sweet and solemn tunefulness; deliberate, almost slow, yet with a sense of the resistless joy and youth in all things in its tone, it seems to be the very voice of the wayward March morning—the north-west wind wreathing the blue sky, with smoke-pearl haze, the stealthy amber sunlight coming and going, the tranquil song of the river deep-hidden in its jungle of yellow reeds, glad light of willow-bloom overhead with its roosting bees, and gold of primrose and coltsfoot and starry celandine strewn the path under one's loitering,

luxurious tread—the redshank seems to take all in as he leads his mate on those ceaseless veering flights to and fro over the glittering swampy levels, and to give all forth again in the one softly reiterated song.

It is not unbridled fancy alone that ascribes to the songs of birds each its expression of racial temperament, or even of individual momentary mood. Those who look upon bird-song as merely the outcome of rivalry, defiance, the marital instinct, must be endowed with a strange obliquity of ear. It is scarcely possible to live much in the country and yet to deny a human-like meaning, often homely and elemental enough, but just as often mystic, exalted, to every sound of wild life that one hears in wood and field.

Robins will sing to each other across a garden like two sad and soured old dames exchanging condolences between cottage doors. Starlings, with their plebeian, self-satisfied chatter on the roof-tree, convey the like fat complacency in sunshine as a mere material good that one finds in the crowded rows of deck-chairs on the front of a seaside town. But what of the skylark's music that will carry the dullest human heart aloft with it right up against the blue floor of heaven, or the nightingale's tender plaint, with its reminder of eternity, in that it makes vocal the quiet of summer starlit nights?

So with this wild, free note of the redshanks, coming over the water-meadows on the wings of the north-west wind, and bringing the very spirit of the earth's rejuvenation with it—a vision of death as but the matrix of life, of the seed that is not quickened except it die.



All along the sunny sheltered bank, in the lee of the oak wood, red dead-nettle makes a rosy glow under the sweet, still morning light. From the deeps of the wayside grass blue veronica looks forth here and there, some of the flowers a full half-inch across.

Amid the old tarnished winter grass thousands of new green growths are springing up; starry bedstraw and crumpled ground-ivy, spear-like leaves of stitchwort, stinging-nettle coming up in solid blocks of green among last year's dun dry stalks, and whorls of wild arum leaves flaunting their glossy verdure in the strong March sun. Now and then, but always modestly at the foot of the bank, gold-eyed daisies grow two-and-two together like bridal pairs, some all shining white, and some with their undersides gaily tipped with carmine. Southward it is all open country, the furze-clad heath stretching away under the rich sun-glow of the still March morning until green and gold are lost together in shining tremulous haze.

To wander about this favoured spot of earth, now that the year is buoying up on its first real freshet of new life, is to move in a veritable land of hope and glory. The heath is ringing with bird-song far and near. Larks, a whole battalion of them, are at their ancient sweet contention up in the blue, and every bush and brake has its clear-throated minstrel. The footfall is so completely muffled in the deep mossy sward, as you loiter through the gilded corridors of the heath, that it is possible to approach almost within a hand-stretch of any of the singers.

And this is the only true way of learning all

that is to be learnt about the songs of English wild birds. They must be studied at close quarters. Nearly every singing-bird fills up the seeming gaps in his music with little low flourishes of grace-notes that are lost to any distant hearing. Song-thrush and blackbird, and all the tits, are specially remarkable for this trait. Even the common wood-pigeon, whose voice, heard across the wood is but a desultory reiteration of a single tone, will reveal to the listener near at hand a truly astounding complication in her erstwhile simple-seeming music. What, afar off, appeared merely as a halt, a bar's rest, in the refrain, is now observed to be filled by a clucking sound, quick and soft and shrill—a sort of sudden surprised ejaculation as little like the rest of the wood-dove's call as could possibly be conceived.

Sitting aloft in the greening hedgerow on the sunny side of the lane, the thrush has set herself to music-making worthy of the day.

There is scarce any British song-bird whose voice varies so subtly, according to weather and season, as the little mavis. All the winter through she has been pouring out her glad, careless triolets of sweet sound, each phrase repeated three or four times over before going on to the next; and the brighter the sunlight, the greater the pace and power of her delivery.

But now, with the warm, glamorous spring mornings, the song of the mavis has taken to itself a serenity and a deliberateness of a piece with the balmy western air, and the fresh bursting greenery of all things. It no longer breaks upon the ear like handfuls of small gold and silver change recklessly cast down through the sunshine.



At last it is an ordered and connected theme, not so much melody as recitative—a kind of epic in tone of the thronging March days.

At this season, too, there reawakens in the song-thrush a very curious habit observable little or not at all during other times of her minstrelsy. For all its variformity of note, the song of the mavis seldom entrenches on those of other birds. Ordinarily it maintains its own distinct qualities—there is no confounding typical mavis-music with that from throat of any other bird. But on these days in late March, especially on bright, warm mornings, the thrush continually interrupts her normal song with snatches of astonishingly accurate mimicry.

Coming down the lane a while ago I heard, as I thought, a redshank whistling in the meadow hard by. There was no mistaking the note—a soft, melancholy pipe that would have been dispiriting but for its tender, plaintive sweetness. But drawing nigh to the spot, I had at length to learn that it was no redshank at all. The sound came directly from above my head, where never a redshank could be. It was made by a thrush, perched in full view on a budding ash-branch; I could see the bird's throat swelling to the strain. And a moment later she fell back upon one of the most characteristic of thrush-phrases, the wonderful summer note of the mavis—heard now indeed for the first time this year—a sudden tinkling freshet of sound that can only be described as like the sound of a crystal ball tumbling down a silver stair.

But the most amazing achievement of the song-thrush in mimicry of other birds will be heard in

early April, just before the nightingale is due. Then the low, slow, tremulous, sorrowing note for which the nightingale is famous will often be met with in the country lanes, deceiving all but the most experienced ear. Yet it is not alone the fact of its being merely a thrush singing that will be so remarkable, as the truth that the bird must be only recalling a memory of the sound from the summer before. She could not have heard the note for nine or ten months back.

To live in a South Down village now is to be, willy-nilly, a creature of one idea. The sheep will not let you forget their existence for a moment, day or dark. Whether it be dawn or sunny noon, amber eventide or the frosty stillness of starlit night, the same rich wavering organ-peal of sound lifts into the skies from the lambing-pens far and near.

And all the talk of the village is about the lambs—how the luck of each farm is going, whether twos and threes are scarce or plentiful this year, what the mortality has been among ewes and lambs; will the crisp, bright weather endure to bless and aid the hard-worked shepherds?

But though the villages of the famous South Down sheep-farming country teem with such gossip all day long, and, night or day, this rich voice of the lambing-yards pervades the air, you must climb the green precipitous heights of the downs, and spend an hour or two in one of the busy lambing-pens, if you would get a real insight into what is doing.

As you win your way slowly up the steep



chalk track, the communal voice of the fold gets louder and louder until at last you are moving in a very babel of deep, luxurious sound. The way leads first between vast rectangles of green sward crowded with sheep, some of the hurdled spaces filled with ewes whose essay in motherhood is as yet only prospective, other where the earliest sheep and most forward lambs have been turned out of the pen weeks ago, the happy mothers drowsing contentedly in the sunlight, the youngsters careering about often in little frolicsome herds of a score together, like kittens at play.

But the strenuous life and ear-splitting hubbub of the whole gargantuan business concentrates within the lambing-yard itself. What strikes one particularly about these South Down lambing-pens is the elaborate skill and labour so obviously spent in their construction. They are veritable fortresses against wind and weather. The whole is enclosed in a high stockade generally consisting of bales of straw laid together like bricks one upon the other, and reinforced by hurdles, with towering battlements of reeds above all—reeds brought from the riverside in huge bundles and stood on end, where their plummy tops make a beautiful mauve-grey fringe against the azure of the sky.

Hard against the inner side of this stockade the whole place is ringed with separate little chambers roofed and walled by hurdles cosily plaited with yellow straw. The central enclosed space is crammed full of waiting sheep at their full time, and littered knee-deep with the same golden-hued, wheaten straw in which the shep-

herd and his underlings are incessantly moving about, caring for the ewes, or picking up the shivering, yammering new-born lambs by all four feet to a single handful, and bearing them off, followed by their bleating, anxious mothers, to the nearest vacant stalls. And so it fares on day and night for long weeks together, until the last lamb is won or lost to the fold.

Though the sun is down, and the evening star bright in the sky, the plovers are still calling over the meadows.

It is a weird sound—this spring love-song of the green plover, peewit, lapwing, whaup, or by whatever other name you know him. If it were possible to convey any real notion of call of wild-bird in humanly utterable syllables, it might be done in the plover's case by "Wheen—wheen! Moo-oo—oo-wheen!"

Sound and movement are very intricately blended in the production of the one weird effect. It is an inexpressibly mournful cry, for all its mirthful underflow. It wheels round the darkening sky above your head, incessantly changing its tone and volume and direction.

And then it is not wholly a voice. The shrill dirge-like jollity suddenly stills in mid-air, and the bird cuts a swift circle close by your ear in the deepening ruddy light, carrying on the symphony by wing-beat alone. This throbbing, unearthly music of the plover's wings swishing by through the gloaming—the bird itself almost invisible against the gathering blue-dark night—is enough to frighten any over-fanciful child. It is hard to believe that you have not been narrowly



missed by some passing projectile, when one of the tumbling, wheeling crew takes a wider, nearer sweep and swoop upon you than the rest.

But the minatory music goes as swiftly as it comes. Throbbing, sobbing, away over the misty vacuity of meadows, it is swallowed up in the quiet of the evening. Far above against the strengthening starshine, the old uncanny melody breaks out again, travelling hither and thither, as though a whole company of broom-riding witches were at their unholy gambols round the sky.

The moon is up now, just clear of the hill-top—not appearing at all like the moon, but more like a great dim golden port-hole in the blue. Moon and stars look tranquil enough, up there in the remote crystalline heaven. But there is no rest upon earth with the spring-fever gripping every creature alive.

In the woods, the great brown owls are winding their hunting-horns; and the white owls are beating the riverside spinneys, keeping track of each other with their stifled, gurgling cry; and the little brown owls, the “Frenchies,” are mew-ing like cats in every hedgerow of field or lane. But these are cries of the night, common, except in their number and intensity, to every season.

Down on the river-flats there is a chorus now, which you shall hear only when the English spring is at its first real flush of life. In this one sedgy, waterlogged meadow, there must be hundreds of frogs, each pouring out his rich harmonious love-call upon the teeming night.





THE FOURTH MONTH

APRIL





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## APRIL

April-tide—House martins—The passing of the east wind—  
The willow song—In April woods—The first nightingale  
—The willow warbler's song—In Bluebell Land—  
Anemone wood—Primroses—The river way—In the bee  
garden—Wind and flood—Mosquito nurseries.

OVER the daisy-field the swallow is skimming in the glad April sunshine, flying as no other bird can fly—in great sure sweeps of a velocity unsuspected until one tries vainly to follow her with the eye; to and fro unceasingly, sometimes covering well-nigh half the meadow at a single lightning curve, now pulling up stock-still in mid-air for an instant's space, then off again in a new direction, passing the bewildered onlooker so narrowly that the sound of her wings is like the swish of a whip-lash just shaving the ear.

And every time she turns, pivoting sharply on the tip of one long sickle-shaped pinion, the sun catches her brand-new plumage, and in a moment the bird is gone—what one sees is a shaftless arrowhead of glittering blue steel, a chevron of dazzling, dwindling colour, speeding away over the vast gleaming planes of daisy white.

In these magnificent April days, when the tide of new growth and life is welling high over all the earth, one is hard put to it trying to keep pace with the tumultuous onrush of things; to eke out the hours of daylight, long as they are, so that nothing may go unmarked in wood or lane

or field. Yet the task is all but hopeless. One new loveliness follows so swiftly upon another all through each thronging day that a single pair of eyes or ears cannot take in half the season's surging avalanche of beauty.

Yesterday it was the larch wood, the winter-long dark deadness of matted boughs suddenly riddled with fresh green and gemmed with living crimson. And to-day, just as the morning star was beginning to pale in the wan silver of earliest dawn, a cuckoo—the first of the season—set up her familiar chime in the cliff of elms beyond the dusky garden-close; I was out of bed and peering forth under the eaves for a glimpse of the singer, scarce awake as yet and hardly knowing whether the song were reality or dream.

Infinitely quiet and somnolent the village looked in the grey, dim light, the stars still bright above, a wisp of morning air faintly astir in the highest tree-tops, the night-mists yet hugging close to wood and field, the sparrows just commencing to roust in the ivy of the old cottage wall; not a sound as yet of any other waking bird near or far. And this clear, sweet note—essential voice of the dawning summertime—giving out its echo-music to the listening hills.

I was still intent upon cuckoos, and keeping ear alert for more of the blithe twin-melody, as, hours later, I came over the daisy-field and chanced upon this other sight—the steel blue glitter of April's first swallow resplendent in her new spring garb. If the swallows are here, the house-martins cannot be long in coming now.

And at next break of day—just as the blue-dark sky behind the morning star began to show a



leavening of opal, and the little attic-room to fill with a stealthy light—there came a sound outside the window that drew me from my bed as swiftly as would a cry of fire.

The martins were back at last. Against the paling darkness I could see a score of them, eddying to and fro, and making sudden dips under the eaves as they passed and repassed; and all the while each tiny fluttering black atom was pouring forth a glad, quiet song—a rich, soft staccato melody, the many small voices blent into one joyous flow of sound that had in it the very essence of all the summer days gone by.

Though I crowded head and shoulders out of window, the better to achieve a view of them, this seemed to give them no anxiety. They took not the slightest notice of my presence, but, obsessed for the moment only by the joy of being back again in their old nesting-quarters after the long night-flight, they kept up their giddy aerial dance and triumphant chorus unconcerned, now and again one of them hurling itself by within an ace of me in its wheeling flight.

The great object of this manoeuvre was evidently to make sure that the little mud-coracles under the roof-edge, which they had abandoned in the autumn, were serviceable for further use. Each was now visited by the pair to whom it obviously belonged, and careful inspection of it made within and without. The birds came in turn, alighting with sharp impact on the rough surface of the old flint wall, and clinging there in the first grey gleam of imminent sunshine, spruce and neat in their new black-and-white garb.

Some of the old nests were still sound as ever.

The birds slipped into the narrow entrances, and sat there awhile with heads protruded, and for ever keeping up the glad, contented song. Other of the nests were completely broken away and fallen, leaving only a semi-circular mark of clay upon the wall. The owners of these clung to the rough flint-facing hard by, apparently in no wise disconcerted, nor even halting for an instant in their jubilant homing song. But some few of the nests put forth an ominous sign. Grass stuck out from the entries, and the sight at once drew from their owners a curious note of angry alarm.

You cannot live long in a country house without coming to love sparrows, and to be glad to share with them your ivied home. But when you are also a lover and harbourer of house-martins, the sparrows set you somewhat in a dilemma. For though they are ready and competent nest-builders for themselves if need be, they like nothing better than to appropriate for the purpose an empty martins' nest. And this, when the rightful owners return, means certain strife. It will not come just yet. Every morning for a week, perhaps, the martins will carry out a reconnaissance in force before actually making a serious bid for re-possession. But then the matter invariably ends in the one way. There is a furious *mêlée*, during which the disputed nest is scattered to dust and the intruders driven off; whereupon the martins set themselves busily to work on a new nest.

The gladness and relief of all wild life at the passing of the east wind is plain to-day in every sight and sound of the countryside.



Yesterday the morning broke in whistling, chill, unkindly gloom, and scarce a note of bird mingled with the hoarse voice of the wind that was tearing through the fresh spring greenery of the hedgerows and laying the dandelions low in the sodden bedraggled wayside grass. But to-day all is changed. A gentle breeze is coming up like balm from the south. Every moment the soft veil of mist to the eastward is thinning before the sun, and a golden light beginning to crest the hill-tops and search the valleys between. The blue has got back to all the shadows and the long-lost murmur of the bees to the morning air.

Looking forth over the dew-white lawn towards the orchard-close where the bee-hives stand, I can see a little streak of misty radiance pointing away from each hive—thousands of crystal wings flashing to and fro on the same aerial path between the garden and the yellow-flowered rapefield under the hill.

But it is the wild birds that chiefly contribute the joyful keynote to the morning. Hardly has the quiet night rimmed the world with a faint grey promise of dawn, when a very cataract of music bursts from the darkness of wood and field about the village.

It is always the blackbird who takes the leading rôle in these daybreak choruses at seasons of suddenly returning warmth. At other times the blackbirds are curiously tardy of song, leaving the day's overture to lesser minstrels; often, indeed, keeping silence until the first woodland ebullition has died down to a few desultory notes, and then beginning the mellow deliberate recitative that is the true authentic voice of April

days. Yet this morning it was the clear silver clarion of a blackbird that first woke the dawn; and, ever since, blackbird music has easily overborne all other tones.

The song-thrushes, after the initial glad torrent of sound, fell strangely silent as the sun clambered up clear of the morning mists, and got his earliest real grip of earth. But the blackbirds keep on with all their original force and sweetness. As they began, so they will continue. It will be a day of merle-music right through to ruddy evening's close.

In their way, too, the rooks herald these resumptions of warm times after spells of wintry cold, with just as evident a feeling.

Yesterday the rooks flew for the most part silent, or with an occasional angry, disgusted caw. But listen to them now in the western mildness and sunshine as they sail over against the fast-clearing blue of the April sky. The whole air resounds with their deep rich jubilations.

Looking up the winding river-way, where, on either bank, ash and alder, willow and reed and thorn, crowd down to the water's edge, you see the flowering willows marking the vista everywhere with turrets of shining gold.

At last the chill north wind has gone, and the hive-bees are able to get across the open fields to the river for this, their first real taste of vernal sweets. Yet it is not to the conspicuous masses of golden willow-catkins that the majority of bees are wending. These have their singing multitudes of pollen-gatherers from the hives, deep-throated bumble-bees, and even a tortoiseshell butterfly or two twirling gorgeously amidst



the yellow cocoons. But for every hive-bee working on the big showy male catkins of the willows there are at least a score rifling the dingy, grey-green inflorescence of the female trees.

If this were not manifest to the eye, the ear alone would reveal the fact. As you pass along the river-bank every tree sends out its own rich reverberant note of music on the sun-steeped air. But the willows and salallows bearing the lean, scarce noticeable female catkins, give forth an infinitely louder serenade.

Here, where the river makes a sharp bend and a stream comes tumbling and frothing into it from the hills, the willows have made generous growth, lifting a mountain of yellow blossom against the blue April sky.

It is rare to find a day in spring when the sounds of the countryside owe nothing to tree-top melody of wind, or rustle of stirring air in bush or brake. But to-day the air seems still as the pent air of a crypt. You look upward through the gold-threaded arabesque of willow-boughs to the sky, dappled over with flecks of glistening white cloud—not a single amber bobbin moves except when a bee puts her weight upon it; the clouds seem as motionless as painted clouds in a picture sky.

At first the willow-song appears to be a continuous monotone of tuneful, dreamy sound, though you know the bees are incessantly coming and going as the leaping water comes and goes—wings and ripples always changing, yet ever the same glad, quiet song. But presently you solve the riddle of its syren power on heart and mind. It is not one, but a blend of a myriad varying

subtle tones. The humming wings of the hive-bee contribute only a minor part of her music; in addition to these, she possesses a whole pan-pipe series of instruments upon which she can play at will. Ten thousand tiny orchestras are massed to produce this wonderful willow-song.

Though the tree-tops resound with the north wind's thunderous fury, here below in the green woodland ways scarce a blade of grass moves in the dim, quiet light.

As I came over the chain of meadows leaning aslant against the buffeting gale, the whole world looked black and dreary under the pitiless avalanche of icy air, and the wood itself seemed darkest and least hospitable of all. But once within the shelter of the crowding trees the whole spirit of the morning changed. For all the grey gloom and wintry cast of things outside, here was April, in hiding indeed, yet living and real. Primroses, anemones, violets, bordered the path-side, and spread away in pools and runlets of soft, sheeny colour wherever eye could follow them through the dusky woodland deeps.

Far ahead on the mossy way there were bevvies of rabbits playing. A pair of jays swept past me, the blue gems on their pale brown coats scintillating as they went. At a crook of the path a cock pheasant came suddenly into view, gorgeous in his tawny and amber. He saw me almost before I saw him, and got up with a whirr and clatter of wing startlingly loud even in that turbulence of over-striding wind and lashing tree-top. His shrill, trumpeting cry held on unchecked until it was lost in the general far-off hubbub of the gale.



And then a woodpecker began to call from the top of an old beech standing alone in a little clearing hard by the way. In a week or two from now cuckoo and nightingale and all the rest of the migrant singing-birds will be plentiful with us, and we shall think no more of the green-jerked yaffle and his merry note. But it is doubtful whether there be voice of bird that so subtly interprets the spirit of the English spring as does this wild, free hailing call, heard, as I heard it then, from the midst of budding April woods.

Now the cry has lost almost all its scornful quality. It is louder than ever, indeed, but it has taken to itself a rich, bell-like tone, and has become almost a song—it rings out now from the summit of the old decaying beech-tree for a long, unhalting minute. An instant's pause, and the wild halloo peals out again, high above the surge and sob of the careering wind. All the morning through, and, maybe, for whole months to come, you will hear this wonderful new love-call of the green woodpecker in the woods, until the last bird has found a mate.

Over there sitting on the hawthorn spray in the full light of the April sun, and pouring out an almost unceasing rivulet of music, one little, plump, grey and brown bird seems easily to dominate all other minstrels.

The thorn-tree rears its labyrinth of fresh young foliage in the centre of the wide, solitary heath ringed about with woodlands, and glowing everywhere with pure shining gold of gorse, the rich colour so intensified by the resplendent morning sun that, on coming first out of the green twilight of the woods, one can scarce look upon

its glory for more than a few moments together. The whole heath is jubilant with bird-song, thrush and blackbird and willow-wren, and a numberless host of finches and tits, uniting their voices in one inextricable medley of joyous sound.

Yet all these are forgotten when once the onlooker realises what bird it is that sits alone on the green hawthorn spray. The sweet wild notes of the nightingale, with their amazing strength and matchless purity of silver tone, lift above all other sounds, and hold the ear as no other song of bird has power to do. One stands under the thorn-tree watching her throat swelling to the music, and marvelling that so small a creature can produce so great a volume of sound.

And to the chance sojourner, hearing the nightingale thus for the first time, whether of a life or a season, this is always the most notable characteristic of the song. If such an one expect from the nightingale consummate art and intricacy of melody, or indeed any but the simplest range of tone, disappointment is ever in store. The nightingale is no great executant; nor does her song possess more than a few notes united in still fewer phrases, wherewith to create its charm. But in its sheer strength, its crystal clarity, its exquisitely modulated pace and stress, the song stands alone.

There is first the low, lingering, melancholy plaint, uttered as though it were torn from the very heart of the bird in exceeding sorrow and unrest. And then a sort of sudden, reckless, unpremeditated abandonment to the grief that fills her—a tumultuous outpouring of the ineffably sweet liquid tones, stemming out upon the sun-



shine as if its cataract of harmonious dolour would never cease.

There is also a quick, reiterated chime, a kind of "shake" in the music, that lends telling hiatus to the more sustained, connected part of the song. And there is an occasional deep vibratory note as from a resonant wooden rattle, which some benighted ornithologist has had the temerity to call the nightingale's "croak." But that is all. Those who speak or write about the song as a piece of incomparable natural artistry betray alike a slavish adherence to false poetic convention and ignorance of the fact.

In the labyrinth of greening hazel-boughs the willow-warbler is of all birds the most difficult to see. His lithe slimness, his swift, quiet movements, his sober dun-green dress, so exactly according with the hues of his environment, camouflage him effectually in the brightest sun. But under to-day's gloom and steady downpour, the keenest eye may range the woodland aisles for him in vain, though ever the hurrying sweetness of his music leavens the dim air far and near.

The willow-warbler's minstrelsy easily holds the wood to-day against that of all other birds. When, an hour ago, a watery tinge of sunshine stole across the dell, it roused the moping thrushes to an instant's light-heartedness, and set the chaffinches desperately to work at making up arrears of song.

A blackbird afar off tried over a few of his most complicated phrases. The wood-dove who thinks it is always evening, began his crooning lullaby. The yaffle—called the rain-bird, but who should be called the sun-bird, for it is always these

fleeting glimpses of sunlight in sousing times that draw from him his lustiest merriment—a yaffle made the whole circle of the wood, tree by tree, laughing ironically as he looped his clumsy way along.

But the light failed, and the steady patter-song of raindrops began again on the young April leaves. One by one the fair-weather crew was silenced. All drew out once more into the single, tender diffident refrain.

The willow-wren is one of three small dingy-green birds that come to us in early spring, and are hard to distinguish from each other, save by their notes. Willow-wren, wood-wren, chiff-chaff; all are much of a size, and of the same sober garb and quick flitting habits, and all three nest in the same odd nooks close to the ground.

The chiff-chaff's note is as much like his common country name repeatedly intoned as it is possible for humanly uttered words to represent song of bird. But no one has ever tried to set words to the willow-warbler's evasive melody. It has a certain kinship with the chaffinch's song in that it is a single number reiterated again and again, with telling pauses in between. Chaffinch-music, however, has a definite unvaried quality. One always knows what is coming when the chaffinch begins.

But the willow-warbler's song can hardly be described other than as the expression of a sudden, unpremeditated, half-incredulous wonder at the beauty of things. There is nothing of the chaffinch's cocksureness and rollicking content and pride of life about its hesitant, almost timorous sound. There is neither time nor



measure in the willow-wren's music, nor any set complement of crochets and quavers. It is nothing but a sudden glad outpouring, all done in delicate grace-notes light as thistledown—a half-whispered, almost awe-stricken exclamation as though uttered in very wonder at the loveliness of bursting bud and pure austerity of woodland light.

And the song is a song that never finishes. The chaffinch brings his performance to an end with a fine dynamic clash of notes. The willow-warbler's song fails at its highest silvery crest and dies away in ever-quietening, broadening ripples; listen as intently as you will, you never know when the music is really done.

Coming from the open heath, with its flood of song and sunshine, into the dimness and quiet of the bluebell wood, is like passing into the shadowy precincts of a cathedral aisle.

Out on the heath the April sun beats down upon a wilderness of yellow gorse and snowy blackthorn and fresh young grass of a greenness beyond all belief—*islands and promontories of shining gold and silver, set in an emerald sea.* But here in the wood scarce a beam can penetrate the thick vault of mingled larch and beech and pine. The sombre canopy, and the crowding grey stems beneath, soften the noonday glare into a twilight that at first seems chilly, almost eerie, in its secret soberness. You have left all the resounding chorus of the heath-loving birds behind. A sudden hush has fallen about you, as though great cathedral doors had been swiftly, noiselessly, closed in your rear the moment you entered the wood.

Even in such a solitude and shady temperate quiet the true bluebells come with each year to their fullness of beauty, and you cannot really know bluebells until you seek them in such a place. Holiday folk who go only to the sun-swept woodland clearings for this shiest and wildest of wild-flowers never behold one tithe of their true loveliness.

They spend an hour in the midst of a vivid incandescence of cold colour, carry back to their suburb an armful of ragged vegetation, and think they have imported true bluebell sweetness into the dust of the town. But the bluebells of the open clearings, or even of the thin, light-ridden wayside woods, have nothing of the true bluebell sweetness and mystery about them. Sunshine is no more a friend to them than it is to the elfin loveliness of hoar-frost. As the lusty breath of it dispels the frail delicacy of the one, so it dissipates the staid, pure subtilty of the other.

And bluebells cannot be gathered any more than you can gather iridescent ocean-foam. Their charm is inseparable from their environment. A bunch of bluebells in a table vase is of all things the most pathetic and pitiable. You have brought but a blotch of fussy, staring colour from the woodland deeps: the spirit of the flowers has evaded you. They are no more bluebells—this wodge of smalt frippery that you hold in your hand—than is the douse of wet brine on your fingers the living, trembling, rainbow foam-flowers of the sea.

There are not many real bluebell woods, even in southern England, the bluebell's authentic home. To come to their true perfection, the flowers need



a location of age-long neglect and oblivion, just a tangle of wild forest growth untouched and forgotten for generations, such as you have chanced upon to-day.

And even so, you must go deep into the grey quiet heart of the wood before you are in the true Bluebell Land. The broad forest road that tunnels straight ahead flanked by giant beech-trees, has only a sparse fringe of cobalt to its brown, leaf-strewn way. But stop where you will now, and in any direction under the soaring rooftop of verdure, you may look out upon a sight that will glow in the memory to your dying day.

Though the wood is so dense and dark above, and such a sober twilight broods around you, it is wonderful how far and how clearly you can see between the crowding stems. And wherever you turn your eyes now they rest upon nothing but a floor of living azure; one unbroken level of softly luminous colour broadening out on all sides between the trees; vista beyond vista of softly radiant light as of a sea of molten amethyst flowing away into the dim distance and ever darkling until you cannot tell whether you are looking upon the blue of bluebells or only the sulky indigo of imprisoned air blocking the farthermost woodland deeps.

This is the true Bluebell Land, and it is worth tramping many a weary mile to see. But to-day you have come upon it in only one of its many phases. On dead-calm April mornings such as this the bluebell wood is in its soberest and staidest, perhaps its most mystic, mood. You can wander by the hour together and hear not a sound but the stealthy scamper of a squirrel

far up in the dim labyrinth of tree-tops, and see not a bell move of all the myriads around you, save when its lip is pulled down by a passing bee. But to-morrow the merry south wind may be drawing wisps of silver gossamer athwart the sky, and setting the whole woodland roof in a flutter of singing.

It will be a mighty wind indeed that can break through that barrier and ruffle the calm ocean of slumbering blue beneath; here in the inmost secret heart of the wood not a breath stirs, perhaps, for weeks together. Nevertheless, windy days bring to the most sheltered reaches in Bluebell Land an illusion of stirring life such as words are powerless to depict.

As you stand in the midst of the hushed, incense-burdened solitude, looking away down one of its fairest aisles, your ears are full of the surging song of the wind in the tree-tops, but no other sound or sign reaches you of the rollicking tumult that you left on the heath. Yet now and again the wind cleaves the dense forest canopy above and lets a single sunbeam through. Slowly the ray travels like a ship's searchlight across the field of view. And then it ceases to be mere sunshine; now it is a hovering, bright-vened spirit—a living thing, the collective, corporate entity of all the bluebells that ever shone in this forgotten Eden—moving over the face of the deep.

Coming to the anemone wood in the level golden sunlight of early morning, you can see the flowers literally waking one by one.

At first, beneath the budding hazels, there is nothing but green—soaring green of dog's-mercury



and the crowding anemone plants, and low-lying green of moss that sheaths the woodland floor everywhere with its softly glistening silk. The anemone flowers are all tight-closed as yet, their pink undersides scarce visible except as a dim rosy warming of the verdure clothing ridge and dell as far as eye can reach.

But as the sun lifts, tiny white banners begin to unfurl and twinkle like stars in the veering western air. Thin silvery crests break out upon the highest ridges near and far. In an hour or two these have swelled to mounting white billows of blossom, and the shadiest dells are alight with living foam.

In woods where the primroses and wind-flowers grow thick together, a very different change is wrought by each day's ascending sun. With the fall of dusk the anemones close their shining petals, but the primroses stare open-eyed at the stars all night long. And thus the callow morning sunbeams find them—one limitless, unbroken spread of cloth-of-gold, of a splendour past all imagining.

Come again at noon, and the rich colour has all but vanished. The larger, loftier blooms of anemone have diluted it almost to extinction. Though the primroses are still there, more of them than ever, the whole wood stands in a lake of silver tinged but with the faintest Orient tone.

It is strange how silent and bereft of insect life these anemone woods remain, until the sun has whitened their dim depths with the opened blossoms, and then how swiftly the wing-music grows. It is always the bumble-bees that first begin their deep sonorous bluster in the silent

glades. The hive-bees, for all the ancient maxim, are incorrigible lie-abeds, never leaving the warm cluster at home until the sun has drunk up the night dews from the flowers they love.

But once out and about, they soon spread the whole countryside with their tuneful murmur. And here, in the anemone and primrose wood, you can marvel at what seems a very mysterious thing. Though, to human eye, the primroses, with their glowing sulphur rays, look by far the most attractive, you soon realise that none of them is ever visited by the bees.

Hive-bees pass the primroses disdainfully by, though almost every anemone flower has its winged singer chanting at its silver portal. The truth is that the sweets of the primrose are placed at the bottom of its deep central tube, far beyond reach of the hive-bee's tongue, while the wind-flower nectar is easily accessible to all.

Coming into the primrose wood from the furze-clad downs, with their glory of golden blossom, everything seems for the moment colourless, chill, austere. And yet there is almost as much sunshine in the wood as out on the open hills.

The crowding ash-stoles, each rearing a thicket of smooth, grey branches against the sky, are still as leafless as in January. Not one of the coal-black buds has stirred as yet to the touch of the April sun. The pale woodland flooring of primroses stretches away on all sides, only the purer and sweeter for the arabesque of dark shadow upon it. But you wonder what has happened to the sunbeams that, a minute back, burned so fiercely about you in the gorse-brakes as though you were forcing a path through a prairie fire.



Thus for a few moments only. And then the eye, cleansed and relieved from its hour-long surfeit of colour as you trudged mile after mile over the glowing hills, gets at last the true keynote of the place. The primroses lose their moony pallor. The reticulation of dark shadow thrown by the ash-wands warms into a tender pencilling, blue as the April sky above.

All sorts of vivid minor growths start into view as though they had there and then sprung from the soil—intensely brilliant spots of amber where the celandines shine among their whorls of glossy green; early spires of bluebell, blue now as they ever will be, but as yet tight-girt and drooping like whip-lashes in the dew-soaked grass; violets, thousands of them, lying in pools, or running in seams here and there through the marbled waste of primrose yellow—you see now that the apparent coldness of the primrose wood when you first struck into it was but a tripping of the eye, an illusion, due to this intermingling wealth of violets, one rich hue killing the other.

The effect of certain coloured flowers on the quality of sunlight is something of a mystery, and white flowers are the most puzzling of all. Black-thorn blossom never shows more than the dead whiteness of paper or snow under the brightest sun. New-blown hawthorn is a living buoyant white until the bees get to work upon it, and then it is dead in an hour. Meadowsweet in the bulk defies the most resplendent noon, though its plummy inflorescence isolated seems as white as anything on earth. . . . And a field of daisies is never other than pure, intense white, whether in shade or shine.

Something of this, no doubt, is due to texture,

the one flower absorbing, the other repelling, the sunbeams. The colours of the anthers of these white flowers must also influence the quality of light given back to the eye. In the hawthorn these are pink, and in the blackthorn orange. Yet why should the yellow anthers of the blackthorn degrade the whiteness of the flower, while the daisy has a brilliance inviolate, despite its broad golden heart?

The green path runs between river and meadow, soft as velvet to the tread. Screened by the over-arching willow boughs, you can walk here a whole morning through, hardly perceived by the wild life around you, yet seeing all the best that young April has to show.

The cold wind and drab hurrying sky have gone at last, the sun burns in a cloudless heaven, and the distant hills have got back their shimmer of blue. Everything in feathers is rejoicing. Out over the meadows peewits are tumbling about in mid-air with their weird cry like a cork being wrenched out of a tight bottle-neck. As they wheel to and fro, their wings make a rhythmic sobbing sound. Coal black and snowy white they seem, as they gambol together in the brave morning light.

You wonder by what aberration of fancy the peewits could ever have come by their other name of green-plover. But looking again, as each bird turns away from the sun, the sombre parts of its plumage shine out with a rich iridescent emerald bright as anything in a peacock's coat; this spring love-play of the peewits over the meadow is just a whirl of soot and snow, with a



flash of green fire in between, and ever the swishing, sobbing melody.

All the birds seem to come at some time or another to the river. That was a flock of field-fares, a dozen or more, scrambling over from tree to tree a while ago, their dove-grey heads oddly contrasting with their dingy, thrush-like bodies, and their queer chatter reminding one of the market jargon of some foreign town. There are moorhens hiding in the riverside reeds; every now and again one calls to another in that shrill, low, cautious way of theirs.

Once, far away, amidst the general ringing chorus, an owl cries, though it is broad noon. But this is the little brown owl that hunts by day as much as by night, and instantly the cry is answered from the leafy depths of an old ivy-tod close by you.

But the thing you will most vividly remember of all the sights and sounds on this first real April morning, after the long days and nights of wintry chill, is the coming of the kingfisher to his favourite pool by the waterside. You hear a high, sharp creaking note, at first afar off, yet growing rapidly louder and nearer. Then there drops into the cool, clear shadow under the willow boughs what looks literally like a spot of sapphire flame.

The dazzling brilliance of a kingfisher thus suddenly drawing to rest on his favourite watch-tower—usually a branch overhanging the water—cannot easily be described. He has a knack of picking out a perch right in the path of what is perhaps the only sunbeam that has pierced the matted roof; and there he sits, ostensibly uncon-

cerned with anything but his own magnificence, preening his feathers and twirling himself gorgeously in the beam this way and that, until, without a moment's warning, he plunges, quenching his light in the pool below.

If you go to the honey-bee, on these bright, chill spring mornings, for an inspiration towards early diligence, disappointment will attend you. Though, from the first gleam of daylight, the village gardens have been ringing with gladness of bird-song, the hives are still strangely quiet, for all the sun has been up these three hours past.

Now and then a solitary bee comes out upon her doorstep, stops a moment to rub her great eyes free of the hive-twilight, then lances straight away into the blue; and other single bees are continually homing. But, despite the mid-Victorian moralists, there is no very early general activity in a bee-garden, either at this or any other season. The early bird may be justified in rising betimes; but the busy bee knows her business too well to leave the cosy indoor cluster until the sun has warmed the oozy margin of the stream and dried the pollen in the golden willow-catkins.

Water is a daily vital need for the nurture of the young bee-grubs now maturing by the thousand within the hives, and some few of the most daring among the older worker-bees run the gauntlet out and home for these necessary supplies with the first grey of the chilliest dawns in spring. But pollen, like the mowing-grass, cannot be garnered until the night-dews are off



it. The main army of pollen-seekers will not be on the move for another hour or more.

Come again to the bee-garden when the sun is high and the day wearing on towards noon, and you shall look on at a very different scene. In April the rich, deep labour-song of the hives can be heard a hundred paces down the lane. The sunny air is full of sparks of flying crystal, gossamer lines of speeding light, as the bees go to and fro between the riverside willows and the old bee-garden under the hill.

The willow-pollen, with its brilliant yellow, is by far the most plentiful and most resplendent of all the loads that the worker-bees are carrying in upon their thighs. Almost as plentiful is the pale sulphur-hued pollen that they are fetching in from the flowering box-hedge hard by; and repeatedly one sees loads of soft clear grey being dragged in amidst the throng, showing that many a bee has been out among the woodland violets. Pollen from the gorse you know by its dingy yellow-brown shade, like stale mustard; and now and then a bee comes blundering down from the skies, hauling behind her a pair of enormous amber globes; how she contrived to get them home from the marsh-marigold beds by the riverside is a mystery.

It is not only wild weather at sea that brings the gulls inland: when the floods are out over the riverside meadows they come in by thousands, and lighten the gloomiest landscapes with incessant whirl and flutter of snowy wings.

Gloomy it is to-day, for all the month is April, with a bitter cold north-east wind raging in the

tree-tops and cutting up the mile-wide surface of flood-water into little cat's paws and angry crests of foam. Through the screen of alder that skirts the river-path, you can reconnoitre this great invading host from the seas, and mark how ingeniously each bird quarters his ground—for ground it is, despite the unbroken glittering water-stretch; nowhere is there swimming depth even for a gull; each is just wading breast-high in the wind-ruffled shallows, all heads kept warily to the breeze.

Every now and again, for no humanly apparent reason, the steady low clamour of the feeding throng breaks suddenly into a wild, weird chorus, and the whole company lifts on the wing, eddying and circling sky-high for a moment, then as suddenly drifting to earth again. Against the steep wooded hillside that looks almost black in the wan afternoon light they seem like a cloud of snowflakes harried by a winter blast. The north-east wind sends down a savage roar from the riverside oaks. Overhead vast dark masses of cloud drive by helplessly on the termagant breeze. The cheerless jargon of the gulls, and incessant scuffling and rasping of the flood-water far and near, complete the wintry despondent picture; instinctively you turn up your coat-collar, sardonically remembering how you used to hearten yourself with visions of springtime in past dreary December hours.

And yet, for those to whom understanding brings a wise, inviolable content with all things English, these days of chill, resounding gloom that are creviced in between days of April glory, are full of the true spirit of spring. The uproar



of the north-east gale at this season is but stage-thunder: the *deus ex machina* in the winter-piece obvious at every turn.

The fallacy in these cold interludes of the English April lies in taking too comprehensive an outlook. When the sun shines and the south wind silvers the blue, it is good to go gaping about at the whole gay universe. But these harsh, sad volleying days are sent us to drive eye and ear to the lovely, lowly details of earth.

Leave the gulls to their crying between grey, hopeless heaven and darkling mead, and look at the dandelions that throng the pathside—how they make their own sunshine, and how each is a sufficient world for a score of creeping things. Mark how the blackthorn's myriad gleaming silver buds seem made for windy days—how, though the whole bush swings to and fro in the gale, not a blossom stirs from its appointed place amidst its fellows.

Stoop down and take a draught of the sweetness of the cuckoo-flowers dimming the water's edge with a hovering lilac mist. And, if that be not enough, lift eyes and ears to the raving tree-tops, and try to make out who the minstrels are that clash tiny crystal cymbals together so incessantly and so intrepidly: the harder the wind blows, the more valorously the oxeyes sing.

Securely sheltered from the wind by the steep bank, not a ripple breaks the shining surface of the pond. Spread with a green veneer of duckweed, and lost at its margins in a tangle of herbage, the pond receives the whole force of the April sun; and the air above is full of the glitter

of insect wings, and a high, fine note as from a single harp-string eternally throbbing—the sheltered, wood-locked stretch of water stands in the heart of a district in southern England famous for its malaria from time immemorial; and now, though the ague has gone, the insect that conveyed it is as plentiful as ever.

If you can tell the true malaria-mosquito from the harmless grey gnats that make up the bulk of the singing aerial throng, you may mark down a score of them passing and repassing between the blue sky and the surface of the water in every five minutes or so.

When, during the latter years of the war, malarious soldiers were being invalided home to England at the rate of five hundred a week, most of them scattering broadcast through our villages—a fact then wisely concealed, but which may now be safely disclosed—there was a real danger that our home mosquitoes might become reinfected and the ancient dreaded scourge revived in the land. But now that the peril is overpast; one may bring the old serene interest to bear on this as on all other insect-life, and there are few among the winged atoms of the countryside capable of exciting more wonder than the malaria-mosquito.

Only the females survive the winter, not hibernating like the queen wasps, but hanging up in the cobwebbed corners of warm dim stables and the like, until the spring sun draws them forth to lay their eggs in the clear breaks in the weed-strewn surface of the pond. You can find them now by the hundred—minute dark objects like black oat-seeds—clinging together end to end



and side by side, and making wonderfully intricate and beautiful patterns of triangles and stars and oblongs that cover with their delicate sombre lacework inches square of the pond. Splash the water, and the pattern is dissipated; but in a moment it gathers again, every seed riding safe and high above the mimic storm. You cannot sink or swamp the eggs of the malaria-mosquito because each egg is built exactly like a lifeboat: sheered fore and aft and equipped at the sides with hollow glass-like floats.

The eggs of the common grey gnat are equally invulnerable to the weather, although individually they have little buoyancy and no special floating apparatus at all. The mother gnat ingeniously assures their safety by gluing them together side by side, and end down, as she lays them, thus gradually building up a little craft—again after the true lifeboat principle—which the roughest wind and the heaviest downpour are powerless to harm.





THE FIFTH MONTH  
MAY





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### MAY

Buttercups and daisies—Rain in May—Blackcap and nightingale—Meadow life—Hawthorn-time—Bluebells—The tide of spring—In the pine woods—Squirrels and their ways—The cuckoo's song—Water music—The nightingale's song.

**E**VERY May the buttercups and daisies put up the same desperate fight for the mastery of the meadows. The daisies are always first in the field. Long before a single buttercup is showing amidst the fresh young grass, the daisies have overrun the meadow with their gleaming white, so that, in the moist dells and on the crests where they crowd obliquely to the eye, their silvery lustre wholly blots out the green.

But it is only for a time. The buttercups, though they are late in starting, soon get under way with a will. The plants grow taller, and throw out side-branches, each bearing numerous flowers, whereas every daisy blossom must spring afresh from the soil. And the inevitable soon happens. The meadow's silver under-frock is at last hidden beneath its mantle of flowing gold.

It is with the common buttercups and daisies as with all common things : very little about them is commonly known. How many of the thousands now who daily tread these wonderfully complex and beautiful flowers into the dust ever think of looking on them for a moment or trying to guess their reason of being.

And yet the most casual scrutiny of either cannot fail to reveal a host of curious or debatable things. To take one point among the many—each flower draws its petals together at night, but each in different fashion. The daisy makes a tight, impenetrable bunch of its silver rays. That being done, the flower is practically invisible even in earliest dusk; for now it has only the crimson undertips of its petals showing—red, which is the hardest of all colours to see in the night; and, to make assurance doubly sure, the daisy pulls up its green sepals like a coat-collar, still further concealing its whereabouts. Thus a whole crowded field of daisies will virtually disappear within an hour of sundown, leaving scarce a trace.

The buttercup never really closes; it just sets its golden door invitingly ajar. Moreover, though the glassy inner surfaces of its calyx are hidden, the yellow velvet outer sides seem to gather the faint light and to shine with a redoubled force. The one flower appears to woo the night-flying insects, while the other repels them with all its power and art.

The conclusion would seem to be that—flower-nectar being generated mainly at night—the daisy is told off to reserve its sweets for some creature of the sunshine who would otherwise go lacking. And this indeed is confirmed by observation. At least there is a tiny day-loving blue-black fly, with stubby body and long, crystal, iridescent wings, plentiful always upon the daisies, but seldom seen on other flowers.

Even though it has been raining steadily since dawn—dense fine rain sifting down from a silver-grey sky all the morning long—there has never



been a moment without its dim half-promise of sunshine almost as cheering as the sun itself.

The air is so still and so generously warm, and so pregnant with the sharp fragrance of the teeming, sodden earth. Thrush and blackbird and cuckoo are singing with an ungrudging lavishness of merry music that assuredly they could not better were they piping the praises of a May morning of flawless sunshine.

And yet the rain keeps inveterately on. The silvery rifts that are for ever showing in the grey formless heaven fade and brighten and fade again. The patter of the warm raindrops on the fresh young leaves slows now and then to an intermittent tattoo, yet never wholly ceases. And a moment later the torrent is giving forth its old drumming, drowsy melody. You know of old these sousing May days, with their ceaseless mock auguries of fair weather—it will be song of rain, and a thousand glad songs of nesting wild-bird from cascading wood and garden, all day long until the dark.

It is on such a morning—standing under the sweet-briar canopy of the cottage door and looking out towards the leafing orchard—that one first notices two things belonging of right to April, but which, in the present laggard season, are given to May—the earliest ruby glint of apple-bloom, and a sound that ever comes with it, the call-note of the bullfinches lured down from their woodland haunts to this, their most coveted feast.

There is no mistaking the bullfinch's pipe. It is just like a quick low breath across the top of a key, endlessly repeated as the bird systematically quarters the green apple-thicket scattering debris

of torn bud as he goes. There is a pair of "bullies" now at their fell work before my very eyes—the male with his full deep scarlet glowing like a danger signal even in this grey light, and the female almost as conspicuous in her sober garb because of its cunningly contrasted hues.

The sight brings back to the mind a very old and vexed problem. Whether the quest of the bird be primarily insect-food or no, the fact remains that, in its ruthless search, hundreds of the fruit buds are incidentally destroyed. Would these buds have turned to red-cheeked apples if the red marauder had been driven off betimes? There is but one humanely practical answer to the question. Violence against the birds is proved futility, even if it were conceivable. The only thing is to suffer them gladly; and experience demonstrates the natural truth that there are always apples enough when autumn comes, despite the bullfinches' toll.

A comparison of one wild bird's song with another is of little service towards identification with those to whom both songs are unknown. It would be strange to the rural dweller, if it were not a fact so familiar, that nine out of ten visitors to the countryside cannot distinguish the nightingale's song; and it is very little help to the recognition of the blackcap's music to speak of that bird as the mock-nightingale, after the manner of most text-books, even if there were any truth in the similitude.

The blackcap's song is a continuous warble quietly and evenly uttered, of a sweet wild purity of tone, full of exquisite modulations, and of compass nothing less than astonishing. Yet the



song is poured forth with such a steady flow, and the effortless notes follow one another so quickly, that none but the most accustomed ear can detect its extraordinary range of tone.

On the other hand, the nightingale's song has little extent of scale, and no continuity or rhythm at all. It is not so much a song as a recitative—a group of melodious statements limited to three or four at most, uttered in orderly succession with periods of silence following each phrase.

The nightingale's power to charm lies wholly in the quality of her silver pipe, and the cleverly varied pace and pitch of her delivery. Her few notes are matchless in their sweet crystal-pure tone, and the forcefulness or restraint, the hurry or lingering reluctance, with which they are alternately delivered. Moreover, her trick of singing at night when all other birds are silent, steals a march on the fancy, and wins her more perhaps than her due; as when one takes a single, simple, else-unregarded flower into a dim, plain room, and becomes suddenly wonder-stricken at its discovered beauty.

The nightingale sings anywhere, everywhere; as often as not close to human dwellings. To hear blackcap music, one must seek out the shiest, most secret woodland nooks. And now a comparison with the songs of two other of our English wild birds may indeed serve, albeit ever so imperfectly, to guide an unfamiliar ear.

Awake with the first grey forewarning of light on a fair May dawn, and listen to the blackbird; note how his mellow clear voice travels to and fro over a good octave in the scale; mark its easy power and calm, almost indolent, tranquillity.

Then wait until the morning chorus of the birds has died down to a single high fine note—it is always the wren, the smallest of the homestead singing-birds, that brings to a close the daybreak symphony—a quiet silver-sweet song, now hurried, now slow, ever holding on for minutes together yet only upon the one stop of her tiny flute.

And now picture to yourself a song with all the range and quality of the blackbird's, but with the wren's speed and soft, quiet continuity, and carry the vision with you to the wood. It will be strange if you do not hear the very note deep in the green mist of Maytide leaf about you; and that, for a wager, will be a blackcap singing.

Coming over the meadow through the level sunlight of early morning, the rich yellow of the buttercups spreads the whole field with shimmering, misty cloth-of-gold. But now, returning the same way at high noon, a curious change is upon everything. Though the midday sun pours down out of a cloudless sky at its strongest and fiercest, the meadow has lost its dominant golden hue.

Looking across it from where you stand in the spot of blue shadow thrown by the solitary thorn-bush, the whole field has taken to itself a mysterious whiteness, of a brilliance infinitely greater indeed than the early buttercup-shine, yet white withal—a living, silver-pure lustre just warmed with a sort of afterthought of palest amber as of sunlight on Alpine snows.

Thus, twice in the day by the clock at this time of imminent summer, the buttercups and daisies alternate their opposing reigns. It will be all over in a week or so, when the taller-growing buttercups will have overreached the lowlier daisies,



and the meadow will be one sheet of day-long gold. But, for the moment, the two are still much of a height. Only the daisies need the full sunbeams to keep them awake and wide-eyed, while the buttercups are golden inside and out and for ever shining.

An open daisy is almost the whitest, most conspicuous thing that grows. But with the first leavening of evening light it furls its gleaming petals, leaving only their dull, red undertips in view, and these again are still further dimmed by the tight-drawn calyces of green. One can stand looking over the meadow as the gloaming steals on, and watch the daisies vanishing crest by crest, and shadowy seam after seam. And while the chills of evening drive the daisies into what is virtual invisibility, the deepening amber light of sundown only serves to intensify the brilliance of the buttercup-gold. The whole strange and startlingly swift effect is just like what happens when a coloured glass is drawn across the lime-light in a theatrical fairy-scene.

It is the daisies seemingly that bring the swallows to the meadow, for there were none in the early morning as I passed by. The truth is, of course, that the whitening of the meadows, and drying of the dew, lure thither the midges and other crystal-winged atoms on which the swallows feed; now the whole, wide, glittering, flowery waste is marked over with skimming swallows, their vivid steel-blue plumage glinting out as they pass and re-pass like flying chevrons of flame.

A little higher, in the serene, sun-steeped air, the martins are wheeling and eddying about in their spruce, fresh, black-and-white garb; and

higher still there are countless swifts—either at work or play; it is too far off to determine—weaving a coal-black pattern against the blue. The swift is always black in the brightest light.

There is only one scent on the countryside now. It pours in at the window on the first morning air. It meets you in every lane and meadow-path. Great aerial zones of its sweetness hover at the village street corners in the stillness of amber evening. Going out into the bee-garden under the star-gemmed summer dark, and stooping down to the threshold of any of the murmurous hives, you detect at once the same incense streaming hot and fragrant through the squad of fanning bees at every portal—the smell of hawthorn nectar brewing in tens of thousands of tiny vats within, to make the finest honey in the world.

It is good to know that, come next winter, the wild birds will have no lack of food; for a good hawthorn-honey year, save by a strange mischance of weather, is sure to bring a plentiful haw-harvest in its train.

That it has come so late in the season is its most favourable portent. Bee-masters can recall famous hawthorn-years whose precocious wealth of blossom has exceeded this. But flowers do not always mean honey. The May before its time, and biting winds to keep the bees at home, rob not only honey-makers and honey-lovers, but deprive the hedgerows of their autumn scarlet. He was of a strange, looking-glass turn of mind who originated the old saying about plentiful berry-harvests presaging hard winters. The hard winter may, or may not, follow. But hawthorn,



and indeed almost all other berries, turn out many or few strictly in accord with the mood of weather prevailing at fruit-setting time of the bygone spring.

Yet it is for what is perhaps a higher use than its utility that the may-blossom appeals to nearly all. A single rare flower, if beautiful as well as rare, may bring its finder a thrill of pleasure, to which few would care to deny a real usefulness. But mere quality is not everything: quantity plays a definite part in the effect of beauty on the human mind. It is not for nothing that nature spends herself so prodigally in this time of upsurging summer—limitless sunshine and flower-shine, endless song of bird and bee from dawn to dark, thousands upon thousands of varied lovely forms of leaf and blade and stem.

And now the hawthorn with its simple unit of five white petals infinitely multiplied until a whole kingdom is chequer-boarded with silver and swept with a very tidal-bore of fragrance that all must breathe.

Where the bluebells grow thickest and wildest—in the old neglected wood of mingled beech and pine—only a stray beam or two of the midday sun can struggle through.

Bluebells, to be really wild, must be out of the domain of the expert woodreeve. Scientific forestry spells ruin to all woodland wild flowers, but to the bluebell most surely of all. Air and sun, good drainage and growing space, the conditions that make for sound, hard marketable timber, as certainly mean extermination to all shade-loving flowers. But the old beech and pine

wood is governed by one of the ancient let-alone school, happily still rife in our midst. It has not rung to the stroke of axe or billhook for generations, and the bluebells fill all its dusky deeps with their glimmering azure light.

You may go to the country year after year in May, frequenting the open coppices and wandering by the hour together through a land choked with bluebells under whose limitless, sun-flooded radiance the eye fairly palls. But all the subtle secret charm of real bluebell woods is dependent on their owner's saving grace of negligence, and its resulting sunless gloom and beautiful austerity of decay.

In this old wood, where the black pine-tops and new beechen foliage unite in one impenetrable roofing far above, the outer glory of Maytide light and life has but the feeblest echo. There is some mysterious quality in new-fledged beech-leaves that winnows from the sunshine all its golden warmth of hue. A water-white obscurity broods in the hollow glades of the old wood, and a quietude that seems to belong to another world.

But the whole wood is filled from end to end with the true wild bluebell blue—a softly shimmering azure not lying in one textureless level, but stretching away on all sides in wave beyond wave of pure, chill, incandescent colour, with dells of duskier blue between, and here and there a leaping foam-fleck of pale sapphire where a ghostly beam of sunlight steals across the way.

Yet the quietude that ever dwells about these old neglected haunts of the true wildling bluebell is very far from being silence. There is a continual murmur of ring-doves high up in the forest roof,



and just as unceasing a carillon of robin-music pervading the dim pent air far and near. In the ever-mounting chorus of bird-voices during the past few weeks, one has failed to notice the gradual cessation of the robin's song about the lanes and fields. But the redbreast has not stilled his pipe for the season; he has only changed his venue. And here he is in the wild wood, his slender, tender, temperate refrain all of a piece with his new surroundings. If colours have their counterpart in music, then the robin's quiet and quaint recitative is just the cool aloofness of bluebells done into song.

The bumble-bees make up the triodion of woodland sounds, typical of bluebell times. Of hive-bees there are but a few stray loiterers here and there.

To see bluebells at their best, one must not seek them in the open clearings. There they make a riotous splendour indeed; the eye fairly aches with the throbbing intensity of their massed luxuriance under the full May sun; the sight of an open glade of bluebells, a broad highway of almost fierce colour dwindling away into one far-off thread of pure flame, is enough to make the doughtiest-hearted sketcher throw down his palette in despair.

But wherever art blanches before nature it is always because some condition humanly fictile has intervened. Bluebells were never meant thus to receive the sun's full partisanship in their growth. They were intended to thrive and shine despite the sober asceticism and greyness and chill of the deep woods. Prosperity works only evil upon them. The impetus given to this fairest of

flowers to override the tepid woodland half-lights, bereft of its natural drag when copse-cutter and tree-felling gang sweep away all between forest-floor and sky, becomes the chief instrument of their undoing.

Bluebells growing out in the open take on a palpitating brilliance of colour, but they lose their subtlety. The hot sun strangles their sweetness and straightens out the delicate drooping poise of their stems until they look like a field of perky blue stubble. The light robs them of their individuality and aloofness, and levels all down into one meaningless watchet smear.

It is not easy nowadays to find a wood where bluebells are allowed to grow under their most favouring conditions of age-long oblivion and neglect. I know one alone in a whole familiar countryside, and I have just got back from it as I write—back over downland hill and dale glowing with gold of furze, and through home-meadows spangled with gleaming daisy-white, the daisies that, for all their golden hearts and rosy under-skirts, are the whitest things beneath a summer sky.

Yet, though I have been trudging an hour since amid all this dazzling supremacy, the cool and secret twilight of the bluebell wood still hold me to the core. Miles away it all is now, and yet the hushed spacious dimness and solitude of the wood of crowding larch and beech and pine still lie like a deep sea over and around me. My slow wandering footsteps yet make that soft rhythmic sound as of ebbing and swelling waters in the carpet of last year's leaves. The bluebells still stretch away on all sides, flowing over every bank and filling



every dell in a hundred receding vistas of azure light.

And yet it is not the name of the flower, nor any conception of a vast and lovely inflorescence, that lingers in the mind with such an aftermath of delight. Bluebells seen in their natural haunts and in their native habit of growth seem somehow mysteriously to lose their identity as flowers, and to become just an expression of beautiful colour, formless as the unclouded blue of the sky. Of all other wild flowers the memory retains some starry likeness, or thought of rosette or garland, linked up inseparably with their beauty of hue. But the mind goes back to bluebells as it recalls a note of music—flower-form and vibrating string alike forgotten in the colour and sound to which they have given being.

It is the turtle-dove that brings us all to our senses again in these intoxicating hours of spring. With the year's full flood-tide of song and sunshine and living, growing colour running high over the earth, the lover of the English countryside, even the most sedately disciplined, is apt to let go a little of the old sane guide-ropes, and yield to the universal impulse that sends staid, elderly kine stampeding across the flower-strewn meadows, and the swifts screaming round the village rooftops, and the larks rejoicing up into the blue.

Every azure cleft of wood and hill has its chiming cuckoos. All the spinneys and hedgerows ring with blackbird-music at its most complicated tunefulness. A galaxy of jubilant sound from chaffinch, willow-wren, thrush and nightingale and missel, overloads the sun-riddled,

perfumed air. The fields are white with daisies, and the lane-sides sheathed in solid gold of dandelion and cowslip and starry celandine. All the trees, to their highest finger-tips, are bursting into mist of young green leaf.

It is all too much for the soberest, most pedestrian nature. One feels a sort of shame to be merely looking on at it all—to have contributed nothing to the Maytide pageant of loveliness, of living colour and scent and music—only to possess it, yet to be answerable for none of its beauty—a sort of grateful shame blent with a longing to add of one's own ever so little to its magnificence, if only so much as a single one of the countless humming gnats or the myriad flaunting green leaves.

And then, in the deep of the adjacent pine wood, the turtle-dove begins her leisurely, gentle strain. There is no sound of the wild woods at this berserk time of gathering summer, so steadying, so calming to overwrought human sense as the rhythmic call of the turtle-dove drifting out of the cool, dark, scented pine wood, like the voice of some eremite chanting from his hidden cell. At once all the glittering, resounding vehemence of the morning seems to quieten down into a splendour of serenity such as one deems eternally existing in the infinite, changeless blue space itself.

You can listen to the note of the turtle-dove by the hour together, and never weary of its tranquil commentary. Even out-and-out sun-worshipper as you are this morning, it may lure you from the brightest scene into the chill austerity of the pine wood, to track the sound down through the dim



glades until, far above against the green woodland roof, you may spy out the bird keeping harmonious watch and ward over the few bare sticks she calls her nest.

In the sunny stillness of the morning, the turtle-dove's soft music seems more in tune with the Maytide spirit of abounding light and life than voice of any other bird.

Sitting on the wayside bank in the lee of the pine wood, you can hear her rich, quiet note somewhere in the fragrant darkness behind you, dwelling on the dim air with all the solemn rhythm of a tolling bell.

It is not really dark in the pine wood. Thread your way in a fathom or two between the close-crowded stems that stand knee-deep in bracken and sprawling bramble, and let the eye grow accustomed to the attenuated light, and you soon realise how independent of intensity is the effect of radiance and sparkle in a natural scene.

It is all a question of contrast. In a minute or two the ruddy-grey stems begin to glow. The black roof-top changes to a vault of living green, with here and there a ragged rent of sky of almost blinding blue. The woodland floor of bracken and bramble is like a threshing-floor loaded with wine-red spillikins of coral studded with emeralds ready for some fairy flail.

Go out again into the dazzling sunshine of the lane, and the darkness gathers once more behind you. But now you know why the turtle-dove eschews panegyric, and why her song is so meet, so grateful, for all the squandered light and loveliness of the day.

It is the point of view that counts. The

rollicking chaffinches sing to urge the sun to ever greater and greater fierceness; with the chaffinches, as with certain human temperaments, more of a good thing seems manifestly better than enough. But it is the soul of tranquillity in a fine May morning, wherein lies its real charm and tempering power to hearts overtried and worn a little threadbare in the ruck of the world. The turtle-dove's slow, quiet music serves to bring back this oft-forgotten thing to mind.

The May sun pours from a serene and cloudless sky. The chaffinches applaud its every beam with explosive energy. A yellow-hammer nods in the brake, rousing sufficiently now and then to sing a bar or two of his wheezy, sleepy, sweet refrain. Missel-thrushes keep on with their single, reiterated phrase; just the same song with which they met February's snow and buffeting gales. Exuberance, somnolence, insensibility—the turtle gently counters all with her low, slow pondering strain.

And now there comes in the pine-tops a sound that makes the heart leap with its sudden and utter unexpectedness; withal a sound alike loved and old-familiar. Country life far inland has this inevitable deprivation—that it knows and owes nothing to the sea. There are no salt breezes, nor still nights full of ocean murmur; no fields dressed with sea-weed giving out to the hot sun its sharp breath-catching sweetness; no white sea-birds following the ploughs. And so the pine woods have been given to serve alike for antidote as for lenity.

The sound of air moving through the pine-trees is the very sound of the sea, whether in hurricane or time of gentle breezes. This passing glow of



wind overhead, that has so suddenly brought you out of Maytide dreams—where it came from is a mystery on so calm a morning—is the very voice of ripples lapping weed-tressed rocks on a summer strand.

As I came through the beech wood this morning, just when the first level golden beams of sunshine were beginning to thrust between the crowding stems, a squirrel got up from the path almost under my feet. So quietly was I going over the thick soft carpet of last year's leaves that he had not detected my approach, it seemed, until I was almost upon him. But then he was off with the speed of light, and up the nearest tree-trunk, scolding harshly as he went.

Even when he had gained secure haven in the fork of a bough some thirty feet above my head he did not abate one jot of his clamorous vehemence. He crouched there peering down at me with his glittering beady black eyes, his long ears bristling erectly parallel, his great bushy, wiry tail lashing furiously from side to side.

He was evidently very angry at my intrusion on his woodland solitude, but alarmed even more than irate. Ceaselessly his harsh cry hurtled out overhead, waking all the echoes of the glade; and his tail wagged to and fro making a continual flash of bright rich tawny in the sunbeam that was trying to lasso him. Thus the squirrel and I remained staring at one another for a good five minutes at a stretch.

And then, by little and little, his sharp outcry began to soften and to slow its pace. The swinging tail described an ever smaller and smaller

arc in the yellow sun-glow. At length he seemed altogether to throw me off his mind as something too remote for further vigilance. He turned himself about and began to wander through the tree-top world of the wood.

Unseen now, or at least wholly unregarded, I followed him through perhaps a dozen trees. This aerial perambulation of the squirrels is one of the most fascinating, as well as puzzling, things to watch. It is the nearest thing to flying surely, ever achieved by wingless creature. The squirrel has nothing but his long streaming tail and his powerful limbs to carry him through the air, and yet he performs the most astonishing feats of progression, so swiftly withal that the most practised eye can scarce take in his method or means.

One sees him glide out to the tips of the most slender branchlets and flow away through the air to the outstretching boughs of neighbouring trees—boughs just as slender and frail; and yet neither sinking perceptibly under his weight, which must be considerable. And then his actual path through the air varies in mysterious fashion. Sometimes it is parabolic—a mounting and subsiding curve from point to point—the normal course of a leap. But as often as not the parabola is inverted, thus apparently defying all known laws governing a projected weight.

More astonishing than all is the fact—verifiable by anyone who will go to the nearest wild wood—that the squirrel's aerial line of progression from tree to tree frequently has a crook in it; he has the power of turning in mid-air.

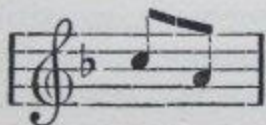
The secret of all this, of course, lies in his



immensely long, bushy tail, which combines in itself the functions of kite-tail, rudder, and aeroplane; while he can glide out almost to the ends of the slenderest branches before "kicking off" because he gathers two or three together with arms and legs as he goes, and so gives them momentarily the united sustaining strength of the proverbial "bundle of sticks."

Full and clear from the heart of the green wood came the cuckoo's song—just the pair of reiterated chiming notes that seemed to lend a rhythm to the hot May sunshine sweltering down from a sky of cloudless blue.

To one unlearned in musical technique, the pure, quiet song sounded exactly like this:



The interval between the notes was constant and seemingly faultless; the pitch as true as two notes stopped on a well-mounted concert flute. And the bird seemed to take a delicate artistic pleasure in delivering each note true and clean. I stood for long minutes together in the solitary sun-barred woodland glade, listening and wondering, and never once did the song perceptibly vary in pace or interval or timbre.

I was just moving on, thinking to myself that here at least was one beautiful sound of summer-time that I had fully taken in, when another cuckoo began to sing in a glowing gold-green elm-top scarce twenty yards away. Its first clear strain brought me up every stitch aback.

All country dwellers know that the cuckoo's changes are not invariably rung on the same notes in the stave. Between one bird and another there is often a difference of half a tone or more. But here was one exhibiting a hitherto unheard-of depth of register. My first cuckoo was still singing, and presently the two songs fell into almost regular alternation. The dullest ear could not fail to realise what a happy chance had befallen; indubitably the second song was just two notes lower in the clef.



And now, with heart knocking and ears astrain, I waited for what I knew might conceivably come to pass. The higher note, possibly from a younger bird, gradually shortened its interval, and the two songs drew together, at length overlapping until there was but a single song drifting down from the sunny blue—a triple measure extraordinarily tuneful in its novelty—coo-coo-coo!: the three notes following each other in perfect time.



So the duet lasted, it seemed, through half a dozen repetitions. And then the slow old cuckoo fell to the rear, as I hoped he might; and the expected climax came. For half a minute, perhaps, the two songs, one on either side of me, chimed out in ideal synchronisation, treble and tenor together, the two perfect chords filling the green woodland dale with such a joyous see-saw



harmony as I had never yet listened to in a whole long country life.



Since that hour I have been to the cuckoo wood many times, in the hope of catching the two players again in sympathetic mood; but, though I have heard the two songs separately at different times, they have never resumed their happy concord, and perhaps never will.

Yet experiences akin to this, being unique in the sense that they almost never repeat themselves, are common enough with the habitual wanderer in country ways. I have seen a rabbit come out of its burrow, apparently moved by nothing but sheer kindness, to stop a fight between two blackbirds throw herself between the combatants, scattering them right and left. And I have stood on a sea-shore and had a dogfish get out of the water and literally walk on its fins to my feet. But one scarcely tells these things expecting to be believed.

Where the little hill-stream takes its last sparkling, resounding leap into the river, the bank is gay with forget-me-not blue. One can scarce thrust a finger-tip between the crowding blossoms. They overrun the bank, and pour down beneath almost to the water's edge, where their shining azure is taken up and carried onward by the mirrored azure of the sky, until it breaks and vanishes into the green gloom of the willow woods beyond. The stream is the only noisy, energetic thing

amidst the sunny sloth of the May morning. Not a leaf stirs in the highest tree-tops. In the spinneys, though there is a ceaseless underflow of bird-song, the general effect on the ear is one of a strange, almost somnolent, quiet. The river moves with scarce a sound—just a glittering, dun-brown level of waters gliding silently by.

But far behind me, where it first breaks from the foot of the wooded steep, I can hear the stream coming, and talking as it comes—hear it check at the rocky, ferny ridge hidden deep in the alder-copse—hear its bright note of relief as it wins free, and its purling, contented murmur through the sedgy ground beyond, until, here at the cleft in the bank, it comes singing into full sunlight, and takes its final plunge into the river.

The wonder of this water-music is not so much its beauty, but its waywardness. The clear voice, or, rather, whole choir of voices, is for ever changing its pitch and volume, and running up and down the scale. When one considers that every gill of water comes over the same bed, meets with the same obstructions, the same dips and twists and turns, and finally tumbles over the same mimic precipice into the same watery deep, it is more than strange that its voice should not keep to one set formula of tone.

But there never was natural running water that sped at the same gait for two minutes together. There is always the pulse of the great unquiet earth throbbing in its flow. Watch the surface of the steadiest, most tranquil stream against some fixed gauge, such as a bridge-pier or baulk of timber, and you will see how inconstant is its level, how the water seems to tilt this way or that; ever so little, indeed, but enough to upset any



cock-surety of view as to invariableness in natural law.

The more one studies the sounds made by moving water—sea sounds as well as the sounds of river and stream—the more of mystery seems to gather about their origin. Mere gravity does not explain the half of them. Only by an effort of will, hardly to be distinguished from stupidity, can one lay to the credit of dead inert matter the production of such subtle and meaning blends of harmonious sound. But if water-music be taken as, in part at least, born of impulses above and beyond its visible source, then the mystery is explained—and left a deeper mystery than ever.

Where the old green cart-track makes a sudden bend between its towering hedgerows just by a little sparkling sedgy pool, a nightingale sits and sings in the sweet May morning light.

The song is no continuous outpouring, as with most other English wild birds. The nightingale's singing is never an obsession with her. She just tunes up whenever the impulse seizes her, and seems to get as much satisfaction from her silences as her song. All the morning through she has been sitting in her silver-budded hawthorn bower, letting off, as it were, minute-guns of melody—long rills of sweet, quiet sound, and sudden cymbal-clashes and low, slow, sorrowful chains of notes infinitely distressed and tender, paid out upon the waiting air moment after moment as though the linked, lovely anguish harmonised would never cease.

And then at last silence; a silence that, in the outset, you spend on breathless tip-toe, agog with wonder and delight, feverishly eager for the

minstrel to begin again. Still silence; and now you are steadying, cooling down into a little season of impatient waiting. Another long minute, perhaps, she holds you at this ear-stretch of expectancy. And again the lingering, sorrowful plaint welling out upon the midge-thronged, perfumed air as though torn from the very heart of the bird.

And yet, though in its peerless quality of tone, its attack, its telling, timely reticences, the nightingale's lay is comparable to nothing else in the world, it would be but throwing a slavish sop to convention if we affected to regard it as, musically, a piece of competent artist's work. So considered, the nightingale, at her very best, is easily surpassed by half a dozen of the commoner British birds. Blackbird, song-thrush, skylark, even the perennially tuneful robin, give us every hour of the summer's day music that is of far more account than anything we hear from nightingale-haunted groves. This little grey minstrel with the silver flute from overseas, so belauded of the ancient poetic schools, is indeed but a poor technician.

But with this reservation honestly made and allowed, the nightingale's music cannot be ranked too high for its quality alone. Its unique crystal clarity of tone is well-nigh startling, even when heard on a fine May morning, when every rood of the flower-spangled earth and every fathom of blue sky overhead has its exulting singer. But at night, when all rivals are mute, and there is but this one sweet voice echoing across the lonely moonlit vale, its effect is one of almost uncanny beauty. If the cold white purity of summer moonlight could be expressed in music, here it is in a wild bird's song.



THE SIXTH MONTH  
JUNE





## THE SIXTH MONTH

### JUNE

"Between the may and the rose"—"Roses, roses all the way"  
—Summer rain—Flood tide—June by the river—The  
song of songs—The mowing grass—Hay carrying, old  
and new—Frogspit—Summer lark-song—Spiders that  
fly—Flowers that love the dust.

NO flower of the wayside varies so little in the date of its first appearance as the common dog-rose. Looking back through a pile of nature notebooks covering a period of more than thirty years, I find the average date has proved the sixth or seventh day in each month of June; at least, this has been the mean time in the green nook of southern country where my caravan has rested for half a lifetime back.

In the famous fair-weather year of 1921 the first wild rose is chronicled as shining in a thicket by Arun river no earlier than June 3; and now, after a spring almost unparalleled for cold and gloom, it looks as if the roses would be out much to the same time. In the same coppice overshadowing the brown water—still now, at the top of the tide—the briars are full of green-antlered buds, one or two already loosening and pointing red. Before a week has journeyed by, the wild roses—true sign-manual of summertime—may be garlanding every field and lane.

With the passing of the hawthorn bloom and the coming of the roses one must put away the last thought of spring. Yet, until the rose-flood

actually breaks and summer bursts upon us, there is something abroad in the green ways of every English countryside scarcely to be matched for loveliness all the long year through. The hawthorn, at first in myriad silver bud, and then in mountainous upheaval of snowy blossom, easily wrests the melody from all lesser flowery growths even in the flower-burdened month of May. To watch the buds unfold, hiding all the greenery of the hedgerow under their spreading petals in a single day of sunshine, is to stand breathless in the very torrent-deeps of the year's beauty.

Masses of pure white flowers, whatever they be, lack commonly an indefinable something of charm to the worshipper of life as a thing precious in itself, apart from its manifestation in beauty of colour and form. But the fresh and full-blown hawthorn creates none of this feeling. The whiteness of the may is redeemed from the chill of the whiteness of other flowers by the sweet rose-red of its anthers. At its first opening each silver cup is full of these, giving to the whole bush, the whole countryside indeed, the authentic hue of warm, abounding life, for all its whiteness remains of the same unsullied purity as ever.

Thus the hawthorn holds the tune against the whole flower-choir of the spring, as a peerless prima-donna will hold it against an entire operatic chorus and orchestra. But then comes this wonderful thing now showing in every hedgerow while we are waiting for the roses. The hawthorn, in the "fading flower of its glorious beauty," does not pale into dun decay, but seems only to enter upon a lovelier phase of life than ever. Look along the winding, sunbarred alley of the river-



path, and where a week ago you beheld only shining splendour of white, now all is of a rich coralline colour; it is as though a cloud of sunset glory lay caught in the tangle of summer green.

It is the roses that make the summer, or, at least, bring summer to its first fresh fullness. So long as the wild roses are only in the stage of myriad green-tinted bud, summer is still short of entire fulfilment. But now, looking across the flowery chequer-board of meadows under the sweet June sunlight, far into the shimmering blue aerial distance, one can see "roses, roses all the way" flushing the hedgerows as with the glory of dawn.

Here in the old neglected grazing meadow—where year by year briar and bramble have gained surer and wider hold, until now the pasture is little more than a network of green tracks amidst a wilderness of tangled bright-hued growth—here on the old grazing land the roses seem to lord it over everything. There are long vines of them arching across the close-nibbled ways, and barricading the paths breast-high at every step; and overhead they meet and interlock their loveliness, so that one can walk for yards together under a rosy roof.

Skirting the meadow on the sunny side, you move in a sort of cloister, where the briar branches, springing from the hedgetop and overreaching your head, droop down in one continuous curtain of bejewelled greenery so dense that scarce a beam of the midday sun can struggle through.

But here and there a break comes in the canopy above. The unclouded sky of June seen thus, almost startles one with the intensity, the dominant

dazzling stare, of its blueness. Wandering out in the open, you seldom look at the sky directly overhead, and when you do turn the glance thither, the eye is led from brightness to greater brightness, and so insensibly prepared for the stupendous depth and power of the zenithian summer blue. But here, looking upward from the hedgerow-shade through that dim rose-gemmed shaft of greenery, the eye is taken unawares and unready. For a moment the vivid incandescent glare of this rose-framed spot of far blue heaven is almost too great to be borne.

It is the pink, the true rose-coloured, roses that the bees love most of all. Not for their nectar, indeed, though that is often worth the fetching after warm, still dewy nights, but for their abundance of pollen. To-day, all the sunny morning through, it has been pouring into the hives like a shower of gold.

Away in the beech wood the sound of the rain on the fresh young summer leaves is the true water-music. But for the fact that it comes from high overhead in the matted wood-top, it might be the sound of a brook hard by, rippling over its stony bed—a steady tenor undertone, with now and again a sudden clash of sweet sound as a flaw of wind shakes the green forestresses free of their watery load.

Days of unremitting rain in the country have never the depressing, gloomy quality of rainy days in towns. There is the same dull, low light indeed. In the beech wood now one can scarce make out the path between the crowding tree-trunks fifty yards ahead. But there is nothing of gloom, no presage of imminent disaster, burdening



the dim air. The whole idea of wet weather being bad weather is but a figment of the town-harried brain.

On such days as these, one cannot stay out in the drenching woods and lanes for long without realising how gladly the birds and all wild creatures herald the advent of warm continuous rain in summertime. Wherever your footsteps lead, you walk amidst one unending pæan of rejoicing. The birds that sing in rain or shine are urged to redoubled effort. But it is the thrushes, robins and wrens—birds that fall strangely mute under the first real summer heat and glow—that are brought back to all their old jubilation of song by rainy days in June.

The beech wood rings from end to end with jolly, careless thrush-music. Every bush one passes by gives out the tender plaint of a red-breast, or the slender, silver rill of sound which marks the wren's unvarying mood of simple, blithe content. Wood-pigeons fill the twilight glades with their slumberous song—that queer soft medley of entreaty and expostulation; and now and then one of them goes off straight up through the green forest-roof with noisy clatter of wing, suggesting the crash of a stone hurled through window-glass.

The turtle-doves have measured every moment of the dripping grey light since dawn with their tolling tremolo of music. As you wander on through the cascading alleys of the wood, you leave one environment of dove-song only to draw within range of another. The one grows still behind you, and the next creeps into hearing on the path ahead. You are never free of the rich,

soft, "corrugated" sound in the mile-long stretch of the sombre way; and when you gain the open meadows beyond, it is the turtle-dove's solemn, contented strain that seems to follow you farthest—the deep-pitched sounds carrying better than the shrill ones—as they always do—through the water-shrouded air.

The ring-dove crooning in the deep oak wood by the riverside on the drowsy golden afternoon, seems to voice the very spirit of high summer.

It is not mere tranquillity and content, like the blackbird's song, nor pure rejoicing at the beauty and fullness of things, like the thrush's, nor a happy, careless rhapsody such as the lark is for ever flinging into summer skies. It is all these and something more—the dynamic quietude that dwells in utmost power and speed. The ring-dove's slow, strong, steady music creeps out to you from the deep wood like the sound of a great spinning-top; quietest and least mobile when at its highest velocity; and so it is with the summer, now that June is getting into its blithest, lordliest stride.

Steady and full and slow, the serene deep song stems out upon the sunlight, calling to you to stop your restless feet for a while, and look about at the squandered loveliness of all things. One never pauses enough on a country walk at this thronging time, nor indeed at any season. But now the very prodigality of wonder and beauty on every side impels one to look close—to take in the little in full rather than be for ever nibbling at vastness.

Amid the tangle of rich lush growth by a river-



side in June there is study for an hour within easy arm's-stretch—golden iris, with its mysterious fascinating complication of bloom; the unfolding of the hogweed buds, each stem loaded with bulky green portmanteaus packed with a magician's whole stock-in-trade; wild guelder-roses covering the brake with shining white horse-shoes of blossom—flowers that are not flowers at all but merely baits, counterfeits, to lure the insects towards the true blossoms within.

The real task is to learn something fully and finitely about any single thing in the multitude. Wild hop-bines are clambering everywhere, ascending through every bush and soaring six or eight feet sheer up through the empty air until they grip the pendant oak-boughs far above. Every year one passes by and marvels at these swinging green cables of the hop; it would be good to go home to-day knowing certainly how the slender flaccid stems contrive to lift themselves.

The truth is the whole plant is fashioned for the attainment of this one object. From its very birth the hop-bine has a twist in its nature. Directly its green snake-head pierces the sod it begins to revolve. Not only does the stem twist of itself in growing, but its apex is bent to one side like the blade of a golf-club, and this, describing a spiral as it goes, takes a turn round every other growth it touches. And there is no going back, nor letting go, for the hop-bine, when once it has got a grip; the entire stem is covered with sharp retrorsed spines—claws that readily allow forward movement through the densest labyrinth, but never yield a hair's breadth of way once gained.

Yet it is when the hop has reached the summit of the bush that these combined twisting and clinging powers come into fullest play. A single bine could rise scarce an inch. But a dozen or more, growing and twining solidly together, weld themselves into a column that can defy the roughest wind.

The green reeds by the riverside are the truest gauge of summer's progress. So long as you can see any of last year's dead, dry wands topping the barricade of verdure, so long you know that the great world-wide ocean of life and green growth is yet short of its utmost reach. There are still flowers to come that are yet only in the bud; still new songs to gladden the ear; greater fullness of sunglow, skies of deeper blue, and scents that are still but essences imprisoned in cells of life perchance yet under the clod.

But the old dun reeds that have whistled in so many winter winds are nearly hidden now. Standing on the river-bank, and looking away over the plane of quivering sun-steeped emerald, you can scarce see one skeleton finger pointing to the sky. Summer is well-nigh at its zenith of growth and beauty. The dense reed-jungle is a finished work at last, and all the wild creatures that live in it, and live by it, are filling its shimmering deeps with sounds of love and chase and war.

That sudden penetrating cry, shrill and loud while it lasts, yet ever at once cautiously suppressed, is the note of a moorhen calling her chicks in from the open tide-way where they have heedlessly ventured, to the safe green



gloom of the reeds. Now and again in the short quiet of the morning, a clear, ringing sound breaks out at the foot of the bank; or you hear a laboured, stealthy splashing coming nearer and nearer, deep in the sun-fretted green. The one is a water-vole taking a frightened header into the current. You will see nothing of him, for he will hug the bottom a dozen yards, maybe, before his sodden sleekness glints once more in the light of day.

But rare luck may bring you a sight of the otter as he fares heavily along, working through the flotsam and jetsam that the river casts up between bank and reeds. It is hard work, this, and every minute or two he must stop for breath and a swift look round to gauge his venue. And then, for an instant, you get full view of him—a great, ragged, dripping head uplifted, fierce as a tiger's, and bulky, coarse-furred body, half-submerged, holding on to a snag with his powerful dog-like feet.

He stays just long enough to fix so much about him in your mind. Then he is gone with a plunge and dash of sparkling spray.

Deep hidden in its jungle of reeds, the river glides invisibly by; you would never guess you were close to a river but for the slow quiet sound of its flowing.

Standing by the pathside on the hot June morning, just within the shadow-brink of the wood, you look out over what seems a solid plane of sunlit green—a shimmering, whispering level of verdure stretching away a hundred yards perhaps until it brings up against more woods topped by a line of distant hill so blue with the blue of summer

air that you scarce know whether it be earth or sky. But midway over this sunny province of reed-tops comes a break, a wavering seam, that marks the river's course; and, now and again, as a deeper breath draws out of the south, the green reeds part for a moment, and show you the sun-spangled floor of waters driving merrily by.

But it is only an instant's flash. The little cat's-paw of a breeze passes on. The reeds draw together again into a solid rampart of greenery. There is ever the quiet ripple-song upon the air, but it is *vox et præterea nihil*—a voice and nothing more.

The river's never-ending song, drowsy and sweet and slow; and the rich labour-chant of countless bees; and, far overhead, so many larks carolling—such a quiet, blithe continuity of music up aloft in the violet sky—that you are almost constrained to think the very sunbeams must be singing as they fall. And now, from the rustling deep of green reeds, there comes over to you a voice, old-familiar with all given to riverside wanderings in summertime, but welcome ever—the lay of the little sedge-bird restlessly flitting from place to place as she sings.

Sedge-warblers bring to the riverside a quality of music that is found perhaps only in the song of one other bird. Yet the humanlike tinge about the robin's song is but a half-hearted repining, the sort of plaintive prettiness of disillusionment that comes to certain gentle shrinking feminine natures born for the open air, but side-tracked for life into the grey street-crevices of a town.

The sedge-warbler's song has nothing of this dove-eyed resignation to Fate about it, though it



has all its invincible beauty of tone. Every note, tuneful as it is, sounds like a protest against something or other. No single item of Creation—you would think, as you listen—is quite good enough for the little sedge-bird. Poured forth almost continuously upon the fragrant, sun-steeped air, and plentifully garnished as it is with little flourishes of pure delight, its prevailing spirit is one of damaging comparison to things that are from things that were, or might have been.

You listen to its chiding, fretful sweetness with pleasure; but with more pleasure still turn ear again to the crooning doves in the wood behind you.

There is a deep cleft in the bank a little way onward, where a brook comes winding down amidst the riverside pastures to join the mother-stream. Leaning presently over the moss-grown coping of the footbridge under which the water passes, you get a glimpse through a sort of tunnel-tube of green leaves, half-reality, half-reflection, at the sun-bright river beyond; the only spot within a mile, perhaps, where the river is clearly visible. The willows crowd thick together here, forming a dense roof of sun-winnowed foliage above, with the same rich dim arabesque of gold and green re-echoed in the water below.

Farther out beyond the willows the brook, flowing through its deep chasm riverward, reflects only blue sky. And then, at the break in the reeds, the little stream vanishes into the foaming, eddying breadth of the river—a side-path of temperate azure cut at right-angles by a great main-street of glittering, speeding light.

This spot, when you have once found it, is sure

to lure you irresistibly at any time of the year, but especially on these resplendent summer days. The little quiet overshadowed creek, full of the purling undertone of the brook and sober, quivering half-lights countered by the eager brightness, the forceful song, of the river below, holds out the best of good-fellowship with both arms.

But when the time is June you will come here for reflections in the literal meaning of the word. In still water, you get a topsy-turvy presentment of wood and hill in perfect replica; its value lies in its desperate exactness, the stark and dead verity of a photographic print. Only in unruffled yet moving water do you get reflections wherein are also revelations of new loveliness that the direct eye cannot take in.

Looking downward upon it now from the mossy parapet of the bridge, you straightway enter a world of enchantment, something fashioned out of the fairy stuff of dreams. All is clearly pictured below; the matted roof-top of willow boughs and sunbeams, warp of green and weft of shining gold—the lichen-stained buttress of the bridge—the roses and white elder-discs peering over—trailing vines of bryony threaded with a myriad stars—the glow of orange-lilies at the green tunnel's mouth, where the mirrored sky begins—the blue sky itself, here no longer an intolerable incandescence but just a calm and grateful depth of turquoise buoying up a single silver fleck of summer cloud.

And all are in subtle mystic motion, not wind-stirred, not a line of their image broken, but made living things by this magic looking-glass of the stream.



Hidden deep in the towering hawthorn that overhangs the river, there is a blackbird singing—singing the summer evening to its tranquil close.

With the lowering sun, the day-long breeze has dropped to the gentlest zephyr, and that only in the highest tree-tops. Close to earth not a leaf moves. The failing, fading hawthorn flowers still shed their petals ceaselessly upon the trodden way. But it is no longer a rain of rosy spangles driving across the view; now the tiny flecks of coral let go their anchorage above in intermittent twos and threes, sidling diffidently down in the serene amber light, as though they feared the impact of their fall would break the spell of utter quietude upon everything. For with the coming of sunset all the birds have fallen strangely mute in the spinneys—all but this one blackbird hiding in the thorn-tree by the river, and he putting forth but half his power of song. Yet it is just at these rare times when the great summer medley of bird-voices fails unaccountably at evening's close—fails, maybe, under some hint of impending storm—that the blackbird is heard at his best.

Listen to the soft, unhurried melody as it stems out upon the calm evening air from the depths of the thorn-bush overshadowing the brimming stream. Every note is in concord with the spirit of the time. The song is a steady onward flow of ever-varied sound, no phrase repeated, and all the notes stopped clean and true as on a well-mounted flute. It is full of grace-notes, and little swift asides of tender recitative, but keeps wonderful time withal; and now and then a pause comes in the music, either a break, a sudden damming-up

in the flood of bland, harmonious sound, or a gradual lapse into silence, so that the intensest listener scarce knows when the song is done. Whether it be deliberate or merely instinctive, there is no denying to the blackbird's music the elements of a work of art.

A long June day of rollicking wind and sun, and driving mist of hawthorn petals colouring the air and littering all the ways as with stammelled snow. And now, at even, the wind gone, and all the world mute at the bottom of a lake of fiery amber, and the one lone singer paying out, link by link, from his ambush of dying blossom a chain of undying song.

Across the shining plane of meadow the swallows are playing like gulls over a summer sea. From your cool green nook in the hedgerow you look out over what is very like a stretch of lowtide shallows heaving under the stress of a breeze—billow beyond billow of snow-white marguerites for foam, and wide slanting zones where the rose-red sorrel plumes and crowding buttercups and chervil blend their rich hues into a simulation of what Homer must have beheld when he sang of wine-coloured seas.

Close at hand the luxuriant meadow-growth is still made up, to the eye, of a myriad flowers; but a little way out the whiteness of the great ox-eye daisies runs into pure froth of churned and sunlit waters, and the tender rose-red and glittering yellow into an underflow that in the distance becomes a shimmering, formless haze of bronze under the soft June light.

And ceaselessly the swallows wheel and sway



to and fro, now touching a crest of blossom with a wing-tip and scattering its loveliness as the low-skimming gulls at sea scatter the white ocean foam, now lifting and soaring into the eye of the sun, each bird, as it turns, looking like a shaftless arrowhead of glittering blue steel.

But the white marguerites, and crimson turrets of sorrel and flaunting buttercup-gold, are only the surface of things—the wave-tops and cascading foam of this ocean of meadow-growth. Near at hand you peer down into a coolness of verdure as into the depths of a translucent sea, and at every level there is some new thing of beauty. Just beneath, the plantains lift their mauve-grey heads amid a jungle of flowering grasses—a hundred different kinds and no two the same in colour or form.

Deeper still there are the hawkweeds, gold again, but not polished metal like the buttercups; the hawkweed is just a tassel made of amber velvet shreds. Then comes a stratum of pink; trumpet-bells and green heart-shaped leaves of lilybind clambering everywhere through the labyrinth of stems. Right below, at the bottom of the meadow-sea, there are the little daisies, thousands upon thousands of them, just like white pebbles sunk in ocean-deeps, and with them a wealth of blue veronica; the whole dim floor of the meadow is covered with their tender, cloistered blue.

The sun lifts behind you, the shadow of the great thorn-hedge draws closer and closer in over the shining plane. Overhead the bees are humming busily in the mountain of white hawthorn bloom. And now a landrail begins her dry,

monotonous plaint as she threads her way invisibly through the green grass-deeps. If you keep quite quiet and still, the note may draw so near that at last it sounds almost under your feet. But you may never see the bird, though you will hear the restless arid song daily, perhaps the whole summer through.

Across the fields in the stillness of the golden evening come the voices of the hay-carriers taking up their last loads.

The farmer here does things in the old-fashioned way, and haying-time on the remote farmstead is still a season of pleasant sights and sounds. First the quiet musical note of the mowing-machine as it journeys round the meadow laying the tall grass low in a beautiful concentric patter of grey on green, like watered silk. And then the day-long murmur of the haymakers—everyone in the village, young or old, pressed into the service—turning the recumbent swathes, or tossing them up like green ocean-spray in the sunshine, or gathering them into long windrows side by side ready for the carriers.

And now at last the great wains lumbering and creaking into the meadows as soon as the sun has drunk up the morning dew; and the pitchers falling resolutely to work against time.

For this is a serious business—getting the hay harvest in, and the ricks safely thatched—and it is curious to mark how the general desultory talk among the labourers ceases now. All the holiday spirit has vanished, and with it the merry rallying and bandying about of rough chaff. The only sounds that reach the ear from the meadows now are the rumble of the wagons passing from hay-



cock to haycock, and the warning call of the drivers just before they move on their teams.

All day long these sounds have been breaking a silence that now, in the deepening summer twilight, has taken to itself a solemn, even a portentous, quality. Straining the eye across the shorn meadow in the ever-gathering dusk, soon you can make out the loading wagons only as vague bulks of darkness scarce discernible in the amber gloom. But the alert, forceful sounds of the work still impress and charm.

But on the other side of the hill they carry the hay in the new fashion—by means of the mechanical loader. It is quicker; and that is all in its favour that the most unconscionable advocate of machinery in agriculture can advance.

Hay-carrying in this wise is bereft of all its ancient seemliness and charm, to say nothing of its music; and even the farmers who employ the method for its celerity admit its wastefulness—machine-lifted hay does not bind well in the load, and much of it shakes off in transit to the rick-yard.

Stark and still under the sweet June sunlight, the meadow lies within its ring of towering hedge-row like a deep-bosomed inland mere. On such still, sultry mornings, just when the meadow-grass has reached its zenith of growth and loveliness, and just before the mowers are due to begin their fell work, it is good to stand under the shade of the great spreading briar-tree and look away over the sunny diaper of living hues, each of the myriad points of colour distinct near at hand, but all merging a little way onward into one diaphanous rosy haze.

Summer has nothing fairer to show than the common meadow-grass seen thus under still sunlight at its fullness of beauty. But it is not mere colour gloriously illuminated; the meadows at this time have a mysterious, softly-glistening, silken sheen, the cause of which is not evident until one looks close among the crowding blossoms and green translucent stems. This entrancingly beautiful effect is due, as one now sees, to innumerable clots of shining white foam clinging everywhere amidst the labyrinth of flower and grass-head; giving to the whole meadow, though it is past noon on a hot summer's day, the appearance of being still drenched with early morning dew.

One would be glad to believe that this frog-spit, or froth-spit, was serving its chief end in thus giving a crowning touch of diamond-like sparkle to the meadow's lake of living wine. But the little stubby creature, with a transparent green body, a snout like a sperm-whale, and protruding eyes of vivid crimson, which constructs these clots of glistening foam amid the meadow-grass, has a very different object in its enterprise. You cannot study the thing for long without being forced to admit rather a sinister motive for all this crystal bubble-blowing in field and wayside now evident at every step of a country walk.

The discovery will soon be made that the masses of white foam enveloping almost every stem in the thicket are really traps for unwary insects as cunningly devised as any spider-web. The spider spreads her silken net in the hedgerow to ensnare flying insects; the cicada-grub that builds the froth-snare is after only crawling game.



All growths in this season have a wandering population of minute wingless creatures. The cicada waits until the sunshine has lured these aloft from their homes in the brown earth, and then cuts off their retreat by blowing a collar of glutinous bubbles round the stem.

Wandering over the downs in the hazy sungold of one still June morning, a lark broke singing from the rough tussock-grass almost under my feet.

I brought up stock-still, straining eyes and ears after the ever-mounting singer. At first the song was strangely loud and jubilant and clear. Though every fluttering wing-beat carried him surely upward, his progress was deliberate enough at the beginning. He seemed to be in some doubt as to his true path, for all he had the whole heaven to his minstrelsy. He veered indecisively this way and that, trying, as it were, the buoyancy of the air.

At length he appeared to find what he sought, and began the wide upward spiral flight which is always the lark's method of soaring on calm days. Up and up he went, the music quietening more and more until there was nothing visible of the bird, but a flickering tiny dark speck in the blue, and nothing left of the song but its shriller tones, and these only to be discerned at intensest ear-stretch. Finally, both song and singer faded away together into the misty violet of the summer sky.

It could have been but a few seconds only, yet it seemed long minutes before the wild, sweet joyous trill pealed out once more infinitely faint

and far above. By little and little the divided cadences strengthened and drew together into the old connected flow of jubilant sound.

Now my eye caught, and lost, and caught again the minute black fluttering point in the silvery azure. Steadily, but surely, the atom of twinkling darkness grew, and the music gathered. The lark came down not as he had mounted—in a wide, ever-ascending coil of flight—but in long, sheer drops and slanting tangents that bore him now swiftly, boldly earthward, his song swelling into all its old grand strength as he fell.

At last the bird came to a halt in mid-air; poised a moment singing his hardest; then swooped suddenly to earth, music and flutter of dark wings vanishing together as the flame of a torch is quenched when cast into a pool.

Thus perhaps the commonest and least regarded, yet almost the most wonderful of country sights and sounds. For why should the lark alone soar to sing? Bird-song ringing amidst the fresh young greenery of wood and hedgerow is self-explained. The sociable and affectionate creatures that produce it are at the glad summit of their life's connubial business. The wonder, indeed, would be if nesting-time were a time of songless woods and fields. But why should this one bird alone, before he can give his whole heart up to his singing, be impelled ever to seek the solitude of the skies?

Passing along into the deep, sunny cleft of the lane the air is full of the sound of insect life. The wayside flowers are thronged with butterflies and bees. But it is the winged atoms which never seem to settle anywhere—the clouds of dancing



gnats and midges, and the shrilling hover-flies—that make up the steady undertone of the morning's music.

The hum of the bees in the last red-tinged glory of the may and in the roses, for all its volume, is but local, a sound of earth; you draw into its range or leave it behind you as you move. The true aerial music of summer comes from the gnats; it is everywhere and nowhere, in shade or sun—the dominant authentic voice of the season.

But there are countless tiny fragments of life for ever voyaging in the air of a summer's day which contribute nothing to this melody, for the simple reason that they have no wings. Stretch a hand aloft at almost any moment in a country walk to-day, and it will be strange if you do not bring down one of these mysterious travellers.

The little shining brown spider which you now find scurrying over your hand is close akin to the gossamer-spiders who, in default of wings, construct for themselves veritable airships of silk, woven so fine that they seem more like films of bluish-white mist than floating spider-webs. This is the true gossamer, the *Fil de Vierge*, of which one sees, on rare occasions and states of the weather, such incredible abundance veering in the calm sky.

The little spider now upon your finger-tip weaves no web, but she contrives an aerial travelling-chariot almost as wonderful.

Watch her now, making preparations to resume her interrupted flight. Standing with head towards the prevailing wind and the hinder part of her body elevated, she begins to pay out a strand of silk upon the slow-drifting current so

fine that you can scarce see it, even against the light. Every moment or two she stops to try the thread and see if it has yet sufficient carrying force. Once she swiftly hauls back a few inches of it, and tests it again—this probably because it has caught somewhere.

She does not want a bridge, but a ship; the sudden gathering-in process pulls or breaks the strand free. As she works, you can tell the direction the line is taking by the ever-varying cant of her body sideways or upwards; though you can see her kite-string only when it reflects the sun, and a swift, bright tangent flashes out across the green of the foliage or blue of sky.

At last, ever trying the line each few seconds, the little spider decides that her aeroplane is ready. You see her body pointing directly upward now, denoting that the line is pulling towards the skies; and that is evidently her chosen way.

Suddenly she stoops and cuts the line away from beneath her, and off she goes straight up into the sunshine, so swiftly that the eye can scarce follow for more than an instant her rocket-like flight.

The old country cross-road is still spared the modern outrage of macadam and tar. But it is, and always will be, the nearest road from town to town, and all the motor traffic in a hurry chooses the risk of its winding tree-locked ways.

Every few minutes a great car comes hurtling by, trailing behind it a cloud of dust that has scarce time to settle before another whirling white billow lifts into view at the far crook of the



descending way. The hedgerows and grassy verges are smothered thick with this dust, the pallid accretion of many rainless days. From every leaf and twig and blade the natural hues have been blotted out until all is as colourless as the wreath on a wedding cake.

And yet the wayside flowers themselves seem to shine out with a lustre wholly undiminished. Though the leaf-sprays on the arches of briar, weighed down with their wealth of roses, are white as the way they shadow, the roses look as fresh and sweet as ever.

The little trumpet-bells of lilybind that throng the choked bleached grass below pour down in their thousands upon the very wheel-way, and, from a little distance, might be pink milk newly spilled in the gutter.

Yellow vetches gleam everywhere, bright as fresh-minted gold. Mallows flaunting their purple satin against the ghostly grey of the hedgerow, each blossom softly a-glitter as though just washed with morning dew; crumpled bramble-bloom of a whiteness pure as a summer cloud, looking just as remotely unsmirchable by earthly dust as such a cloud itself; silver-weed that is ever cool and sober-tinted like green growth seen in moonlight, white enough now under the universal pall, yet throwing off coruscations of lemon-hued stars seemingly without a speck of the common defilement.

But it is the wayside poppies that appear to triumph most completely over this modern presentment of the Vesuvian avalanche of dust. They are so quick, and brief of life—here to-day and gone to-morrow—that the dust has little time to

work them ill. All down the dwindling vista of the road they flare up amidst the cloying whiteness, like warning lamps in a fog. In single specks of vivid scarlet, in twos and threes, in whole sheets of intense palpitating colour, the poppies lord it over the dust and all kindred lesser growths alike. Their brilliance is so clear-cut, so arresting, so splendid, that one is almost tempted to regard the manifest conceit as sober fact, and look close to see whether the churned-up particles of road metal really do fall on leaf and flower together as common-sense dictates.

Even then you cannot be sure of the truth. Look as intently as you may, the fact cannot be made so obvious as wholly to set aside the fancy. A strong glass even will not resolve the point. The regal purity of the poppies, the sweet rose-pink freshness of mantling lilybind, and mallow drapery straight from fairy loom, and all set in this dead-white welter of clinging flint atoms—it would be good to believe the flowers inviolate in this way, good to believe that nature had deemed it worth while to outwit modernity even in such a little thing as the plague of motor-dust.



THE SEVENTH MONTH  
JULY





## THE SEVENTH MONTH

### JULY

Songs before sunrise—"The way of a bird in the air"—  
Birds of the wayside—Songs of summer—The Purple  
Month—The honey flow—In the poppy field—Ringing  
the bees—Jellyfish or flower?—Flowers of the sea-shore  
—"A pype of greene corne"—"Elevens" joy—  
Kestrel weather—Sedge-birds and Reed-birds—The  
time of meadowsweet.

**I**N the old sweetbriar by the cottage door a dunnock has built his nest; every morning well before sunrise he flits across to the elder-bush and sits there singing by the hour together—a pleasant, voluble song with neither beginning nor end to it; just a glad outpouring of his little soul's content at sunshine and the cool of green leaves.

But, long before the dunnock begins in the garden below, the martins are awake and busy. All along under the eaves their little mud dwellings cling, partly to the old flint wall and partly to the ancient thatch. In summertime this martin colony is never really silent. Waking at any hour of the night, I can hear the low, whispering plaint of the fledglings, with now and again the old birds' crooning lullaby note always with a ring of sleepy expostulation in it.

And before the eastern skyline has begun to show the first pale promise of dawn the male birds are off and away on the hunt. You can hear them scuffle out of the nests and "kick off" from the wall one after the other, with a sound strangely distinct in the quiet of the last summer dark.

I know it is the male birds who go off first, because the same thing happens in the early nesting-time, when the hens sit close. Quite obviously it is the male bird then who is out and about so early, and incessantly to and fro with food for his brooding mate. Every time he brings her provender he clings a moment to the wall and sings a bar or two of his quaint, chuckling melody, then off once more on his busy foray.

The martins are early astir on these brave summer mornings, but the woodlark is earlier still. Woodlarks are curiously local in their habits, and so pass for rare birds. Probably also their song is confused with that of the skylark by inattentive observers. There is little question, however, that the woodlark is earliest of all among our morning songsters; for, on warm, still nights, he makes sure of being first to sound the *réveillé* by never going to bed at all.

Country folk, gamekeepers and the like, whose business carries them much abroad at nights, are all familiar with the woodlark's plaintive song. Perhaps there is nothing among all the sounds of the wilds possessed of quite the same appealing, affecting cadence as the song of the woodlark heard far overhead against the starshine of a still and sultry summer's night. The song has none of the blithe abandon of the skylark's music, nor its romantic virility and verve. It is just a steady continuity of sweet quiet notes, often so faint and attenuated in volume that one must stand and listen at ear's stretch to take in all its serene loveliness and delicate repining *diminuendo* of phrase.

Yet once heard it can never be forgotten.



Those unfortunates who have gone through the mill of wakeful nights in cities, with their terrible recurrent chimes, and so have learned to associate sleeplessness with all baneful, unblessed noises, should come and try a forced vigil in this green nook of English country where woodlarks abound.

So still was the cloudless summer morning that the marksman's old device for trying the wind—a moistened finger held aloft—scarce revealed the direction of the languid sultry air. Over the green wheat riddled with poppy-scarlet the swifts and martins played, and here and there a lark hovered low like a kestrel, motionless but for its fluttering brown wings. As I took the path down the hillside, a turtle-dove lifted from the deep of the corn, and a thrush ran on before me through the winding shadowy crevice in the green.

Deeper and deeper grew the wheat. Waist-high at first, and thrilled through and through with poppy-scarlet and crowding hawkweed blooms like great ragged yellow dandelions each shining like a little sun. Deeper and ever deeper into the green jungle of corn as down into a deep green sea, until at last I found myself moving in a strange immured silence, the thronging wheat-ears all but meeting overhead—all the world hidden and mute save for the one unending tumult of lark-song far above in the blue.

It is the larks that really preserve for the English summer its abiding youth, when almost every other singing-bird is silent in wood and field. From mid-July onward until the second week in August—when the robins are due back in their old haunts round about the village gardens—there is scarce any but the skylark to sustain the ancient

tradition of England's being a perennially song-blest land. But one needs to get away from the laneside woods and hedges full of the busy, joyous tweeting of the young fledglings, the very volume of which serves to give to the summer's morning an illusion of song; get away into some such isolated nook as this, the deep mid-ocean of the wheat, whose dense thicket cuts off all other sounds but the one quiet, persistent symphony from above.

Most familiar, perhaps, of all our country songsters, there are yet few who listen to the skylark year in and year out remembering always what an unfathomable mystery this air-borne music really is. Almost the commonest incident in a countryman's day, winter or summer, is to hear the silver ripple of the skylark's song pouring down with the sunbeams, and to know that all the grand, sweet strength of the music comes from one tiny flickering black atom scarce discernible against the remoter blue. Alone amongst all our wild birds the lark must ever soar to sing; but why, unless it be for human pleasure, not the wisest of us can say.

Lying in the thick grass under the hedgerow you look up through a sort of wide old-fashioned chimney-flue of greenery starred with roses, until the furthestmost roses embed themselves, like a pattern in enamel, in the blue of the summer sky.

Thus, quiet and inert in the deep herbage, it is not long before you lose all count and significance with the wild life around you. The turtle-dove who stilled her drowsy music when you first came along has begun again in the oak-top hard by. There is no sound so restful, so wholly in tune with



the spirit of a calm summer's morning as the turtle-dove's note. She sits in full view on one of the highest branches just within the green shade, letting her measured chime drift out upon the sunny air—a single tone sedately uttered at regular intervals with a tremulous quality like the "shake" on a violin.

Close by, a yellow-hammer has an echo of the same leisurely, well-nigh somnolent spirit in his refrain. He begins with a sudden merry jingle, but always ends on a wheezy note long drawn out, and dying away at last as though he had fallen asleep as he sang.

As summer wends on, all the birds that haunt the hedgerows by country lanes seem to acquire this deliberate quality in their music. Though the number of the singers and the volume of their song have not greatly diminished, the pace of their delivery has perceptibly slowed down.

There is a blackbird whistling now, dwelling on each note so long, and putting in so many queer roundabout phrases, that you hardly know it for the old dynamic melody that urged along the blithe April days. Even the thrushes are turning their romping country jigs into minuets, and their allegros into andantes; you feel the same slothful, unenterprising spirit yourself, lying here under the roses by the laneside, instead of being alert and eager for the hills.

But it is with feathered life as with human-kind; neither the young birds nor the children share the immobility of their elders in sultry summer times. The air is full of the shrill, chirping chorus of innumerable fledglings hidden away in the green deeps. Young birds keep

mostly under cover while their wings are growing, but as soon as the flight-feathers are anyhow strong enough to support their weight from bush to bush, or even carry them unharmed to the ground, all the anxious expostulation of the parents will not prevail to keep them in safe cover.

A little ball of dun-brown fluff has just slanted down through the sunshine across your field of view, and come to roost on a low-jutting bramble-branch on the other side of the lane. It is a young goldfinch, as you guess when the mother-bird follows a moment later and begins a frantic appeal to the twittering youngster for instant return to the secure haven of the rosebush whence it came.

And then you are witness of one of the prettiest sights in all these thronging summer days. Incessantly the mother-bird flits to and fro, calling to her chick and imploring it to follow her. For a long while, thoroughly alarmed at its venture, it does nothing but keep up a timorous twitter. At length courage and capability seem to return together. From the depths of its fluffy brown coat two shining yellow vanes spread out like breaking spinnakers, and, like a great golden butterfly, it lifts and is gone.

The yellow-hammer, sitting in the laneside hedge amongst the roses, seemed to voice the drowsy spirit of the summer's afternoon more nearly than any other bird. The wheezy, indolent sweetness of his song drifted out upon the torrid air like oozing poppy-honey that brings slumber with its sweetness. There was something infinitely rest-impelling about the strain, and I stopped at the nearest gap in the hedgerow to lean upon the



old lichen-gilded gate the better to enjoy the sound.

Before me was the oat-field, a vast sunlit plane of shimmering, whispering green, over which innumerable swallows and martins played, chipping blithely as they went; and behind me was the beech wood, with its squabbling jays and crooning turtle-doves, and now and again the merry twink of a chaffinch or a robin's slender, tender lay. Once or twice a blackbird tuned his mellow pipe in the riverside alders beyond the field, and a hedge-sparrow tried over a bar or two of his cascading, overbrimming melody. But none of these were sustained songs. The old daylong, unhalting rondolade of spring and early summer had failed and gone with the cuckoo's chime a fortnight back.

Though July is yet full of bird-music, the summer silence is slowly but inexorably gathering. All these songs were but intermittent breaks in the quietude that has been settling over the countryside for weeks past. They served to dispel the silence for the moment. But it came welling back directly the music ceased. Only the yellow-hammer's song—the string of hurried monotones, and then the one sweet, long-drawn-out, somnolent stress of melody—seemed to be unalien to the summer's drowsy spell.

Yet when the heats declined, and the sun was yellowing in the high west, there came a sudden harking-back to the old mirthful, dominant spirit. The swifts got up into the blue heaven, and went tornading round in a berserk company, filling the serene golden air with their weird, wild hunting song. An evening symphony, brief

indeed, yet akin to the old sundown chorus of June, lifted up from wood and meadow far and near. There were larks carolling overhead in the blue gloaming long after the quiet of night had fallen.

And then came that most authentic voice of sultry summer nights—the shrill, high, chirring song of the night-jars as they clung lengthwise to the lowest pine-boughs, or chevied one another in wheeling flight between the crowding stems. I turned homeward at last, sated with melody, only to lie awake half the murmurous, fragrant night listening to the owls in the wood hard by the house, and the comfortable “weet-weeting” of the young martins in their mud-cradles under the eaves.

In Wild-flower Land, July is the month of purple, and all the hills and lanes are running high with the colour-royal. Tall foxgloves lean against the hedges, some of them lifting their rose-red spires athwart the summer-blue above. Violet-hued tares clamber everywhere through the greenery. Below there are crimson knapweeds and thistles of every tint of mauve, and mallow blooms like countless shreds of deep pink satin caught in the brake.

Where there is open wasteland, the rosebay willow-herb is just getting into its finest fettle—thickets of pure, fair carmine, the slender feathery wands all drooping one way under the stress of the gentle breeze. Truest purple of any is the great crane’s-bill, now to be found decking the roadside verges sometimes for miles with scarce a break, the flowers standing singly or in clusters of two



or three at most, yet, seen in a vista, clothing the whole wayside with a mist of regal colour as far as eye can stretch.

But to witness the real triumph of July as the veritable Purple Month, one must go to the moorlands; not indeed for the heather—that is still short of its full blossoming-time—but for the heaths, the plants bearing innumerable elongated bell-like flowers, so often mistaken for the true heather, in the one of a peculiarly intense dynamic shade of magenta, in the other of crimson, soft and pure, though sometimes pale as a damask-rose. The true heather, regarded from the standpoint of beauty, is an altogether inferior growth, its flowers minute and trifling and spiky, and of no brilliance at all. But the heaths, now in their utmost glory of blossom, give such a surfeiting splendour of colour as can be seen nowhere else perhaps in any land, east or west.

Wandering over the heath-clad hills at this time the least impressionable of travellers must be struck by their utter squandered magnificence of beauty, while a few may also mark something strange as well as beautiful about them. There is, of a truth, a steady, low song of bees upon the air, yet nothing like the huge volume of sound one might expect. Moreover, looking closely, one may discover that very few of the bees are visiting the gorgeous heath-flowers—the vast majority are busying themselves only with the grey wild-sage growing in between.

The fact is the hive-bees have, ages ago, found out that though so brilliantly attractive in hue, the heath-flowers yield but feeble washy sweets; and so most of them wait until the true heather

spreads its dingy arid purple over hill and dale. And then one can trudge from zone to zone of resounding organ-music where the ground is draped with but a faded, furtive, yet honey-drenched growth, passing across acres of prodigal, barren resplendence, where scarce a sound frets the torrid languor of the summer's day.

Taking the footpath through the clover-fields in this, their heyday of blossom, one unversed in honey-bee lore is more than likely to hesitate when but a little way over the wide snowy expanse, and then incontinently to turn and flee.

For the roar of the bees in a great field of Dutch clover just at its prime of flower is something that might well give pause to the hardiest, if he did not know that a hive-bee never uses her sting save in actual or supposed defence of her person or her home. Away foraging from the hive, she is the most innocuous of creatures.

Though at the present moment there are enough bees in the clover-fields hereabout to put a whole army out of action, that army might march through them now, and never suffer a single sting. But bee-masters do not need to go into the fields to learn where their winged millions are seeking the raw material for honey-making.

The loads of pollen which at all times a certain proportion of the flying bees bring back to the hives are sure indication of the source which is being exploited for the time being. In early spring, when the willows begin to bloom by the riverside, these air-borne argosies are laden with pure gold. A little later, pollen of a rich deep yellow-brown commences to flow in, and one knows that the bees are rifling the gorse-bloom.



The time of hawthorn is signally marked by a sudden and almost total change of the pollen-loads to one uniform dingy white, for when the may is out every bee must forget all else and go to sip at its myriad brimming cups.

Then follows a time when no special nectar-yielding plant seems to be flowering on the grand scale, for the pollen-packs show incessant diversity of colour—evidently the foragers are trying all round; shaft-sinking at a venture everywhere, in the hope of striking a main reef.

But at last, as June draws on to its close—earlier or later, according to the season—the characteristic yellowish-white of the Dutch clover pollen begins to appear on the busy thresholds of the hives. In a day or two there will be nothing else coming in, and the entire bee-garden will be in a feverish uproar of work; innumerable thousands upon thousands of bees lancing to and fro between the hives and the clover-fields whitening the landscape far and near.

Sainfoin follows hard upon the heels of clover. You can always tell when this magnificent honey is brewing in the hives. For if the hillside over against the village were not flushing rosy-red in the summer sun, and if the new honeycombs were not changing their hue from snow-white to a delicate lemon shade, there is the sainfoin-pollen tumbling all day long into the hives, looking exactly like pellets of old yellow wax. It is not hard to guess how the bee-masters of ancient times came by their notion about beeswax being gathered from flowers.

Even on the calmest days full-blown poppies are never still for a moment of time. The tares,

amidst which the poppies grow, are locked together in one solid tangle of purple and green; it takes half a gale to set them swinging. But the poppies above, no matter how thick they stand, are ever in incessant motion, though a wetted finger held aloft to test the wind—after the manner of the old prize marksmen—may fail to reveal the slightest drift of air.

The poppies, with every stitch of red silk spread to the summer sky at the tips of their slender green masts, seem to create for themselves a contention of wandering zephyrs. Looking out over the vast field of sunlit scarlet from the shade of the old hedgerow elm, you can see every blossom quivering and swaying all ways, until, on the far hillside, the flicker and glow of their rich, massed colour is all but lost in the tremulous blue haze of summer air.

But it is the tares alone that the humble-bees and hive-bees are searching so busily, and that have brought to the field its deep throbbing murmur of insect-life. The honey-bee works upon poppies freely enough when the mood takes her, and gathers from them largesse of pollen of a sombre green hue—you can see it pouring into the hives for days together during certain breaks in the nectar-flow from more important crops.

But to-day humble and hive-bee alike are passing the poppies by. They are concentrating their forces wholly upon the tares, and the thicket of green frond and purple raceme is in an uproar of reverberating music.

Yet how many are there among all daily using this path by the tare-field who note one strange thing about the horde of winged plunderers chant-



ing at their feet? Even old experienced bee-masters, on being interrogated as to the composition of honey, will answer, unhesitatingly for the most part that, honey is made by the bees out of nectar gathered from flowers. But this is not always the case. Very good honey, and plenty of it, comes from these purple tares that the flock-masters grow annually for sheep-feed by the hundred acre. Yet, look as closely as you will to-day, you will not see a single hive-bee on any of the tare-blossoms, though the humble-bees are incessantly rifling the tender purple sprays.

The truth is the honey-bee has no power to prise open the tight-girt tare-flowers, even if her tongue were then long enough to reach their guarded sweets. But nature has made special and ingenious provision for preventing the hive-bee going empty away. At the base of each leafstalk on the tare-plant there is a little green fin or frill with a sunken ruddy-brown spot in its centre. This spot is really a valve through which the sweet essences of the plant are continually oozing; and hither the astute hive-bee comes unerringly, ignoring the more attractive blossoms on the way.

As I passed along I saw that the hedge round the cottage garden was dense and high, so that, from the laneside, nothing but the tops of the enveloped apple-trees could be seen.

On the other side of that impenetrable screen of flower and leaf, a wild, weird symphony was lifting into the blue sky—a rich, deep organ peal of sound that I knew could come from nothing else but swarming bees, and, high above this sustained booming note, an incessant shrill

clamour as of beaten metal rent the sunny air. After some frantic but fruitless prospecting I found a thin spot in the hedge at last, and thrust head and elbows through.

The little garden was full of flowers resplendent in the morning sun. Amidst these, innumerable old-fashioned hives of straw were dotted about like golden mushrooms under the chequered shade of the trees, all set in a mist of scintillating wings. And by the cottage door, framed in roses, stood a hale old woman lustily beating with a great door-key upon a gleaming copper pan.

For all I had read and believed about "bee-ringing" as a long discredited myth, there seemed no doubt of the syren power of the music here. Even as I watched, one of the apple boughs hard by began to droop under the weight of its gathering host. Within a few short minutes all the flying bees had joined the cluster, hanging motionless in the sunshine like a mass of shimmering brown sea-weed, and the wild, weird song had died away.

Wandering along the sea-shore these sultry summer days, one often chances upon what are commonly called jellyfish newly stranded by the tide.

Seen thus out of their natural element, there is little suggestion of life and beauty about them—mere inert formless lumps of transparent matter, with perhaps a touch of dim colour enclosed in their quaking crystal depths. Coming by a few hours later, one can find scarce a trace of them. They seem to be made of little else than water; the hot sun has reduced the largest of them to no more than a glistening stain upon the sand.



But if you take boat on some calm, sunny morning, and pull out a little way over the shallows of the bay, where these jellyfish, or swimming medusæ, love to congregate, you get a wholly different notion of their place in the scale of being. Letting the boat drift with the tide and peering down into the clear, still water, you may see many of them at various depths, either voyaging singly or playing about two or three together exactly like butterflies dallying along the flowery verge of a country lane.

Nor is the association of butterflies and flowers with these puzzling creatures of the sea wholly a fanciful one. The swimming medusæ, so plentiful near our coasts at this time, possess a beauty of colour and form and motion little suspected by one who has seen them only stranded and helpless on the shore. Most are bell-like in shape, and the peculiar swinging movement by which they achieve progress through the water is caused by the winnowing of innumerable arms that protrude from the cavity beneath, incessantly wavering to and fro obviously in search of food.

By far the commonest of these medusæ displays within its crystal bell three rings of shining purple set off by a bunch of milk-white streamers below. Another fairly common species is like a big glass mushroom with an edging of lacework in vivid Prussian blue.

All these, though generally shunned by bathers, are perfectly harmless. The true stinging jellyfish—or at least the only member of the genus accredited with mischief in these northern waters—is perhaps the handsomest of any. Unlike the others, his "jelly" is not crystal white and clear,

but of a pale, cloudy straw-colour, starred and striated with vandyke-brown. Moreover, he is furnished with a number of really wicked-looking tentacles, while from the rim of his yellow bell long thread-like processes spread round him in the water wherever he goes.

Peering down now into the still, sunlit shallows, you see them all come wavering by in turn, with that singular butterfly-like gait which is so suggestive of leisureliness and jollity. And yet the swimming medusæ are much less like butterflies than detached, living, wandering flowers.

Standing on the low-tide sands just at the foot of the steep shingle-beach and looking landward, the yellow horn-poppies make a crest of pure gold against the blue of the northern sky.

The intense blue of the summer air and the sunlit yellow of the flowers seem to act and react upon one another, so that the eye can scarce endure their brilliance. The poppies crowding together look like tongues of flame overreaching the weed-strewn ridge from some hidden fire beyond, and the wind rocks and sways the vivid masses of colour so that the illusion of a ragged flickering line of flame is all but complete.

In the hollow way between the heaped shingle and the low red sandstone bank beyond, all manner of sea-loving growths flourish.

The yellow horn-poppies, rooted seemingly in nothing but stones, stand up amid a tangle of sappy green leaves. There are whole stretches of the shingle all but hidden under white of milfoil with its ferny foliage as fresh as if it grew in a sheltered inland lane. The bittersweet that loves



a country hedgerow is as plentiful here where the salt sea-spray of every storm drives over it, as it is where it drinks only dew and rain from the skies. Only it has given over its generic habit of climbing. It sprawls everywhere over the stones, laying its garlands of deeply-lobed leaves flat upon the way, and shedding its purple stars so bountifully that one can scarce stir without crushing them underfoot.

A strange flower grows in profusion here that is seldom met with much beyond flood-tide mark. This is the sea-holly, aptly named so far as its prickly foliage goes, but much like a plume-thistle in respect of its blossom. The sea-holly is counted among the rarer plants; but though it is never easy to find, it is common enough if one knows where to look for it. The bright, pure cobalt-blue of its flowers shine among the rough knot-grass here like fallen flecks of the summer sky.

But the strangest of all plants in this wild sea-garden must be looked for in the crevices of the sandstone bank that cuts it off from the glowing cornfields beyond. The samphire—Saint Pierre, St. Peter's plant—is perhaps more akin to seaweed than anything else inhabiting the dry earth. It is just an endless coral-like ramification of thick, fleshy tubes bright yellow-green in colour and with a rank smell like crude kerosene.

Going down through the oat-field on the still sunny morning is like wading out through a calm summer sea: one gets deeper and deeper with every moment into cool translucent green.

At first, the poppies hold their own triumphantly

—the glow of their sun-flooded scarlet lights up the corn-field everywhere; and with them is gold of charlock and white campion bells; with an undertow of buttercup and blue veronica and pale red pimpernel beneath. But this is only in the shallows on the crest of the gently sloping field. With every step downward now the corn lifts higher and the poppies grow scarcer. At last, only by standing on tiptoe and craning the neck, can one see over the sun-steeped whispering level of green.

Oats at full growth and in full green ear give forth a quiet, stealthy sound at all times, even on the calmest summer days, when the wheat-fields lie stark and mute under the torrid noontide glare. The wheat bears its fruit in solid upstanding pods, every one apart from its neighbour. But the oat-plant carries its berries on slender, many-branched sprays that touch finger-tips everywhere across the whole vast plane of the field. The faintest drift of air that will not move a leaf in the highest tree-tops is enough to set the oat-sprays whispering and conspiring secretly together. Now, as you stand over head and ears in the dense green thicket, you can hear tiny rills of sound breaking out on all sides—a sort of dry, husky, tinkling music coming and going mysteriously under the silence of the summer noon.

Full-standing barley also has its intrinsic note seemingly quite independent of any movement in the air. But it is the wind, and the more the merrier, that brings to barley its main charm. One needs to be on a hill-top on a breezy day, overlooking the barley-fields, to realise all their beauty at these times—the wonderful wave-



patterns that are for ever coming and going, waves of light and waves of shadow following each other across the field in ceaseless procession, and all done in shimmering green floss-silk.

Not in mere beauty of sound, nor in a lovely changing visage of form and colour, does the full-grown wheat make its chief appeal, but in the multitudinous winged life which it lures to itself at this season. Corn, of whatever kind, has its flowering time, and this is the time of flowering for the wheat. Every fat green ear has thrown out an infinity of buff-hued pollen-tabs, that now are loading the air with a fragrance exactly like the hot, sweet, tangy smell of new-baked bread.

It is this that draws the thousands of tiny atoms of insect-life thronging the sunshine far and near, and these again that draw the swallows. Standing now in the deep of the wheat-field, as you stood a while ago among the oats, every moment you flinch at the lightning swoop of a swallow passing, it seems, within a hair's-breadth of the face.

Passing out of the wheat-field to sit under the hedgerow, we are facing the full summer sun, but not a ray of it enters our cool retreat. The fierce light stops short of the longest stretch of leg amongst us, for the densely-matted growth of elder and briar reaches out a couple of yards or more just overhead, making a rim of blue dusk all along the sunny side of the field.

It is the hour of "Elevens," and only those who have worked in a hay-field from dawn till near upon midday of a hot summer's morning know what the call to this brief ten minutes of rest and refreshment means to tired and thirsty men.

One moment they were scattered—singly for the most part—throughout the vast sun-baked field, pronging over the swathes in the hollows where the tedder could not dip for them, or gathering the hay into windrows ready for the carrying, or mounted two together on the summit of some perambulating mountain of shuddering green, desperately trying to stow the hay that the mechanical loader was pouring relentlessly down upon their heads.

But at the first stentorian call of the old foreman, every man forsook his job and made straight for the cool blue haven of the hedge. The great stone jar was hauled dripping out of the stream, haversacks opened, and the crisp, quaint Sussex tongues fell to wagging with a will.

For, nowadays, with so much speeding-up machinery in farming, there is little chance of talk in working-hours. It is one man to a machine that does the work of six, and so hours of solitude for everyone. When "Eleveners," and all the other welcome breaks in the long day's task come round, the modern farm hands are as ready for talk as children escaped from the silence and restraint of school.

It is only on the downs, or like open treeless spaces, that windy weather can be also serene, quiet weather.

Though a stiff breeze is blowing from the southwest, here in the heart of the Sussex highlands there is a quietude abroad that one never gets down on the wooded plains, where every tree and bush lends a noisy turbulence to the blast. To know the wind for what it really is—an essentially



silent thing—you must come up here on the green, bare hill-tops. There is a low, surging song amidst the grass-bents round your feet, and a sea-shell murmur in the ear. But the great torrent of air careering over thirty visible miles of lowland, with its far-off rim of silver sea, is in itself as silent as the grave.

Windy weather is true kestrel weather. On days of calm, the kestrel-hawk finds his traditional manœuvre of searching his hunting-grounds from a look-out post in the skies a laborious occupation.

There is not a moment's rest in it: his wide vanes must be for ever beating the air, or he falls like a stone. But in these boisterous times the kestrel can stop up aloft as long as he will with little or no apparent effort. With head to the breeze and wings and tail outspread, he can hold himself fixed to one spot in the blue for a long half-minute together, or indefinitely so by help of an occasional lazy quiver of the wing.

But the kestrels are not always watching for prey when they are engaged in hovering, whether in calm or rampant times. In the early mornings they are keen enough on their quarry, and they search the low-lying meadows for food during most of each day. But on summer evenings, especially when the warm sou'-wester blows, kestrels have a way of disappearing from their lowland haunts and going off to the hills for social intercourse and recreation.

In his day's business necessarily a solitary bird, the windhover undoubtedly has this very human-like attribute of seeking the society of his kind after working-hours.

This evening, as I came over the green waste of

downland hills in the level golden light, leaning back aslant in the arms of the gale, I counted no fewer than eleven kestrels all in one small space of blue sky. The whole company was hovering at various heights, each bird now still as a black chevron inked upon paper, or now moving wings and tail together with a curious fluttering action that maintained or regained altitude without sending the bird forward one jot.

Every now and again one or another of the company suddenly broke the ranks with a wide sweep backward and downward, then a lightning vertical plunge, a veritable "nose-dive," straight to earth.

The alighting of a kestrel upon the ground is one of the prettiest pieces of air-technique to be witnessed even among the birds, who took to flying a few æons in advance of man. The nose-dive is continued at full speed until, one would say, within ten or twelve inches of the ground. And then head and tail are flung upward and wings outstretched. In the merest fraction of time utmost velocity is checked to a gentle, almost imperceptible, subsiding motion as of thistledown.

Stepping into the little boat and turning her off the brimming, sun-flooded river, and letting her glide deep into the waterside reeds, you come to rest at last in a green cloistered gloom that for a moment seems almost darkness compared with the boundless light of the open river-way.

The song of the sedge-warbler, sweet though it sounds as one is pulling by on the glittering tide, takes on a new meaning when one follows the bird



thus into her dim, quiet concert-hall, and she is singing within an ace of the ear. No foliage conceals so thoroughly as the slender spear-leaves of the reeds—infinately multiplied lines of green light and green shadow criss-crossing together on every hand—and you need not hope for more than a brief glimpse of the singer, though you watch the morning through.

But she sees you sure enough, and the rustling, tearing entry of the boat, though this sound lasts but a moment, seems only to have urged her to a more melodious vehemence than before. The song, almost continuous hitherto, pours fast and furiously through the thicket now; and if it halts for a moment, one can usually start it again by taking a grip of the nearest reeds and shaking them. Even, when going by on the river-path, the mere casting of a stone into the dense reed-jungle will often draw a peal of the sweet, sulky, voluble music if there be sedge-warblers hiding anywhere within the brake.

But it is not alone the sedge-bird's song that draws the lover of wild life to the river-side at this season. Yesterday, pulling up one of the sunniest reaches of old Arun river just at the top of the tide, I marked a pair of tiny, pale brown birds restlessly flitting in and out of the brake. They were reed-warblers, as I knew at once by their plumage and their desultory, arid song; and it was evident that their nest must be no great way off. Turning the boat's prow into the little bay in the dense reed-thicket where the birds were going to and fro so busily, I soon made out the nest.

It was a very curious nest, in a very unusual situation. Reed-warblers almost invariably hang

their little grass pocket, that serves them for home and nursery, well up in the reeds out of reach of the highest tide. But this pair had made a mistake which, but for the timely exercise of ingenuity, might easily have led to disaster for all their hopes. The nest had been started on the orthodox plan, the material being woven round four or five of the reed-stems, binding all firmly together. It must have been almost finished before the birds discovered that they had built too low, and the nest must be inevitably submerged at each spring-tide.

What the builders then did to remedy their mistake could be traced in the peculiar form of the finished structure. It was virtually a two-storied nest. Even now the lower storey was dragging in the stream. But there was no fear for the upper part. The tide had reached highest flood-mark, and well the birds knew it. I put my hand in, and could feel a clutch of well-grown fledglings warm and dry within.

As July draws to its end, and the upland flowers become scarcer, the wilderness of blossom by the riverside only seems to grow more luxuriant, and to take to itself richer, more varied hues.

Most plentiful among waterside flowering plants at this time is the meadowsweet, with its soft, white, feathery blooms and delicate almond scent. But though the meadowsweet throngs the river-bank wherever you go, its pale, misty inflorescence does not draw the eye like other growths. One never notices a single frond of meadowsweet. Even when the river runs through a whole wide province of it, the meadowsweet lends but an undertone to the picture, a textureless scumpling



of light spread abroad, it would seem but to enhance the power and richness typical of every flower bred and born in the fullness of summer heat.

All the riverside flowers of late July are set in this pervading environment of the meadowsweet. The willow-herb above everything—fairy goblets of carmine incredibly fresh-looking and bright, each with a little maltese cross of silver poised within its crimson cup. With the meadowsweet again—one unbroken, softly shimmering stretch of it—turrets of tansy break up here and there: strong, green columns topped with smouldering beacon-fires, knobs of tight-clustered flowers giving out a glow as from red-hot brass.

Another turn of the river-path brings more of the meadowsweet's subservient medium into view—a whole jungle of meadowsweet on either flank of the river, and everywhere above its filmy deeps nodding heads of thistle, mauve with a rosy glint in them, that catch the light and shine as cut amethysts when the bumble-bees pull them down, releasing them like springles as they hum off to the next living gem.

And now white upon white—the great bindweed bells with their trails of green heart-leaves stretching from stem to stem in the thicket, taut as a ship's rigging. But the whiteness of the bindweed is as that of pure day, while the whiteness of the meadowsweet, with which it mingles, is no more than a moony pallor strangely at odds with the spirit of the fervid summer noon.

And indeed it is at night alone that the meadowsweet, for all its limitless abundance, achieves any sort of leading rôle in the flower-pageantry of the

season. Come to the riverside on a still moonlit night at this time, and the whole scene is changed. Willow-herb and tansy, golden ragwort and bindweed and purple thistle, all have mysteriously vanished in the colour-destroying moonbeams. But the meadowsweet has suddenly taken to itself a new magic of light. It is no longer a vague, scarce-perceived background for the gay-robed multitude of summer flowers.

Under the white radiance of the moonshine the river flows by through a fairyland of blossom whiter and brighter than anything the day can show. Every frond of meadowsweet now is a torch burning with a white-hot, sparkling lustre that outvies the very moon herself. Its scent has quadrupled in intensity and pungent sweetness. All the pale moths of the countryside, it seems, have come to drink at its myriad brimming cups.



THE EIGHTH MONTH  
AUGUST





# THE EIGHTH MONTH

## AUGUST

August in the woods—Signs of the times—The riverside—  
Bees in heather—Insect play—Down on the sea-marshes  
—Sea-swallows—Shags and cormorants—The wayfaring  
tree—Colour in harvest-time—The nettle-guns—The  
“summer silence”—The robin’s return—The passing of  
summer.

**I**N the hazel wood, the broad green rundle leaves, matted and interwoven above and on all sides, cut off the summer sunlight as no other foliage seems to do. Though the morning is fair, here in the deep of the wood, there is little more than a sombre green twilight abroad.

A curious sense of being indoors falls upon one directly the wood is gained, and as strange a quietude. The rollicking south-west wind that pursued one over the meadow is suddenly left behind. Scarce a breath stirs under the dense vault of leafage, and such a solitude dwells there that the step falters on the dim path as it might on entering the soundless gloom of a cathedral aisle.

To get the spirit of remote woodland life in summertime, one must first idle away a good half-hour in some such haunt as this. And then the place begins to reveal itself in its true guise. Its solitude, indeed, becomes only more profound as the moments wend on. But the seeming gloom changes to a pure clear light, subdued yet abundant for its purpose. The quietude, at first almost oppressive, turns to a veritable atmosphere of

sweet, soft sound. One realises that these hazel woods, far from being deserted by wild life, are the chosen resort of a host of living creatures who love to be alone at certain times in the year.

That is the keynote of the place. Wherever a crevice in the woodland roof lets through a sliver of the golden light, there you will find innumerable flies quarrelling shrilly together. But all other creatures seem to avoid the company of their species. A single wood-pigeon is calling somewhere overhead. A solitary jay flits away up the green, shadowy path before you, but his harsh cry brings no answering note.

Little restless birds pervade the thicket invisibly, ever moving ahead of you as you go, and ever giving forth as they flit on, one slow, monotonous plaintive note, the very voice of solitariness. The moths and butterflies—pallid, flickering spots in the dim glade—pass and repass singly. Even the flowers of the pathside, creeping jenny and rock-rose and silverweed, have ceased to bloom in the old crowded, elbowing, companionable way. Here and there an isolated bell shows itself in the grass, its tiny light held primly aloof from its fellows. But there are no brimming pools and runlets of rich colour, such as marked the woodland tracks in bygone hours of May.

All this has a sobering, even rather a chilling, effect on one coming straight to the woods from the outer glow and glory of an August morning. But it has its use—one almost ventures to say its design—in the scheme of summer beauty. There is this peculiarity about hazel woods—one never knows at what turn in the densest, gloomiest way one may not come upon some little clearing



intensely flower-bright, and ringing with bird-song and chant of bees. And then all the riotous profusion of summer growth comes flooding back to the eye cleansed and prepared and eager to feast upon bright colour again after the darkness and austerity of the wood.

Though the summer blue still glows in the sky, and it is real summer sunshine that floods the flowery lanes and fields, every day now brings sure token of the change that is nigh.

The dew lies later and later, even on the fairest mornings. The martins are beginning to ease their day-long aerial gambols, and to congregate idly on the sunny sides of the village roofs, where they make twinkling spots of black and white amid the smears of lichen gold, and grey and vivid emerald of the clinging mosses.

This morning, though the robins and the wrens were at their old conspiracy of summer song in every glowing garden, there was suddenly a note upon the air that, for the moment, carried one irresistibly onward into mid-December—the shrill hubbub of a flock of starlings—only a score or two, indeed, but still pregnant sign of what is coming—drifting from tree to tree down the elm-barriered lane.

Down by the river there is even more certain portent of the year's impending change. The south-west wind is still at last. In the waterside spinneys the great white bindweed bells hang motionless in the sun, and the shining carmine florets of willow-herb stand up against the blue distance of wooded hill and dale as still as gems set in smalt enamel. The tide is at the full, and no sound of moving water breaks the utter

quietude of the slothful golden noon. And yet the air is riddled through and through with a stealthy, low rustling note from the great barricade of reeds flanking the river on either side.

There is none familiar with river-country but knows of old the voice of wind in green reeds. Yet this is no sound born of moving air, nor yet of water flowing through the myriad harp-string stems of the great reed-jungle. Air-voice it must be, unless the quivering purple plumes that top the green reeds everywhere have, indeed, some mystic power of utterance of their own. Probably the sober fact is that there is drifting air abroad not to be discerned by human sense, but which these delicately poised fronds of the reeds' ripe inflorescence are tuned to receive and interpret into the incessant low sibilant note now vexing the silence of the summer noon.

As the summer wends on, the riverside path gets more and more densely overgrown. Now, in mid-August, one can scarce cleave a way through the thicket of flower-cumbered greenery.

It is not easy to tell of its beauty—this solitary winding track, with its long arcades of cool blue gloom, one stretching interminably beyond the other, lit here and there with zones of sunshine, like golden beads upon an azure string. But every yard of the way, shadow or shine, is overburdened, smothered, with blossom; stopping at any point and looking backward or forward, one sees only a vista of rich colour bright even in the regions of profoundest shadow, but of a glory unimaginable where the resplendent August sunlight floods down through gaps in the ramparts of green.



The vivid carmine of willow-herb gives the dominant note to the summer symphony of colour—this and rose-red valerian which is almost as plentiful; the two crowd down together to the water's edge in great overrunning masses, billows of colour that break against the green barricade of reeds as ocean-waves against a cliff. And all are festooned and interlaced with great bindweed, the snow-white trumpet bells carried ever onward like flocks of glistening, windborne foam until they are flung into the reeds—you can see hundreds of them clinging and glimmering far within the jungle-deeps.

Here and there, where the dense growths of willow-herb and valerian are interrupted, loose-strife lifts its purple torches sheer from the water's brink. Horse-mint makes a soft pale sheen of mauve all along the bank, and water-myosotis—the true forget-me-not of the old German love-story—wantons in-between. On the other side of the path the hedgerow is thronged with white wild clematis, and pink bramble bloom, and knots of guelder-berries already flushing scarlet, and vines of bryony-fruit like cherries strung together, yellow, red and green. But here, as everywhere, the great white bindweed-bells overrun all. They seem to shine with a light of their own making; in the deepest, shadiest nooks burning with only the more intense an incandescent lustre for the gloom that surrounds them, and, in the full sunshine, with all the eye-aching splendour of Alpine snows.

Coming down through the clover-fields a while back, I wondered how even the South Down shepherding country could produce so many

butterflies—clouds of them at every step, so that there seemed a gay fluttering wing for each clover-head of the myriads scenting the summer air. Here on the river-path there are more butterflies, yet of a different order; not flying sparks of colour as in the clover-fields, but great stately things, slow of movement and sombre of hue—lending the touch of motion, a stir of life, to the quiet bright scene—intensely quiet for all its dynamic fullness of high summer; such a quiet as comes to a spinning-top at utmost speed.

There is no sound of the countryside so restful, so healing to tired nerves, as the drowsy music of bees in heather. Lying in the little dell in the heart of the purple-clad moorlands you hear the note all round you, soft, insistent, lifting and falling, like the sound of waves by a summer sea.

The August sun beats hot upon you where you lie. Overhead arches a sky of unsullied blue. The west wind has scarce strength enough to twirl a leaf in the clump of silver birches that peer at you over the crimson brim of your retreat. Far away, on the utmost limit of ear-stretch, you can just catch the laugh of a yaffle in the deep wood, and rarely a lark sings a stanza or two somewhere up in the remotest reaches of the blue. But there is no other sound in all the wide expanse of heather-clothed hill and dale. The bees have it all to themselves.

Yet, for all its drowsy tunefulness, the sound of bees in heather does not set you slumbering. It will rob you of all initiative for bodily movement—make you forget the holiday tramp of twenty miles a day which you had designed so confidently



in your dusty study at home—hold you spell-bound, dreaming, by the hour together, here in the little sun-flooded hollow where the sound is loudest and richest. But it will not lure you to sleep. Rather it will rouse in you a mental alertness—a curiosity all the more intense for the bodily inertia that goes with it. For there is much more to learn from this siren-song of the bees in the heather than you guessed when you threw knapsack and staff aside a moment ago, and flung yourself down in the gold-green hollow of mossy turf upholstered in crimson like a bed prepared for a king.

Letting your glance wander idly about you, you soon mark a whole sheaf of curious things.

To begin with, the fact soon dawns upon you that it is not the most gorgeously draped growths that the bees favour. The thicket at your elbow, which is just one intense, eye-aching glare of purple flowers, has scarce a bee upon it. A little farther away a great clump of bell-like flowers, paler in hue, yet of the same dominant richness of colour, is only occasionally visited by the chanting company. The main volume of music comes, as you now make out, from a species of plant almost sombre in appearance, that even under the full light of the summer sun gives back only a dim, attenuated flush of pink.

You sit up and begin to look more narrowly at these things. The honey-bee is no fool, you know of old; her wisdom is beyond all questioning. If she neglects these magnificent arrays of palpitating colour, and busies herself with the humbler, dingier growths, it is because she has good reason for it. And with the help of a pocket-glass, at

the expense of a little trouble, you can soon wrest from her a secret that is veritably as old as the hills.

First pluck a spray of the dingy growth. You see it is smothered with little pink spiky blossoms, fair enough in themselves: the apparent dinginess of the whole plant is due to the minuteness of its flowers and the sombre green of its leaves. Yet this is the true heather, or ling, from which the famous heather-honey comes; and you will not wonder that the bees love it, when once the glass has revealed to you the abundance and easy accessibility of its sweets.

Now pull a tuft of another sort—that which throws up from the root a forest of single stems, each stem bearing at regular intervals of half an inch or so four leaves crosswise, and carrying at its apex a cluster of perhaps a dozen bell or pitcher-shaped flowers. This is not heather at all; nor is its first-cousin, the rich vivid purple growth, whose lavishness of beauty so far outvie all the rest. These two plants are heaths, and you always know heath from heather by its bell-like blossoms—the old song about heather-bells is but the product of harmonious ignorance: the heather has no bells, but just the tiny spiky florets you have just seen.

There is heath-honey, indeed: the bees make it in July, mostly; for the heaths are in full flower well before the true heather begins. But once the ling-harvest is ready, the wise honey-bee scorns all lesser sources of provender.

If you had come to the purple moorlands a fortnight back, you would have seen bees in plenty working upon the heaths. And then—even now, indeed: for there are always a few



whimsical bee-souls who persist in keeping to the early inferior brand—you could have noted two remarkable things. First, that, despite the asseverations of certain importers of foreign bees to the contrary, the nectar at the base of the purple heath-bell is just reachable by the tongue of an ordinary English hive-bee, although it is somewhat of a stretch. Secondly, that by no possibility can the English or any other hive-bee reach down to the sweets lying at the bottom of the bell of the cross-leaved heath, stretch her tongue as she may, for the simple reason that the bell is far too deep.

Yet the bee gets the nectar all the same. And how? Turn the glass upon her, and you will see. She makes no attempt to rifle the blossom at its mouth, as she would do with the purple heath-bell, but goes straight to a little crescent-shaped puncture in the corolla close to its base, and therefrom drinks her fill at her ease.

Where the two field-paths cross, and a yard or so of the beaten track does double duty, the turf is worn away, laying bare the chalky under-soil. Over this white patch in the green a cloud of gnats is playing. There are very few elsewhere in the field. But here, all the summer morning long, hundreds of them have been dancing in the sunlight. I came by half a dozen times perhaps, and always found them hovering over the same bright spot of ground.

Gnats will do the same thing over linen that has been laid out on a grass-plot to dry, or even over a spot in a meadow where daisies are growing close-knit together, making a continuous silvery sheen amidst the sward. The explanation is probably

that these light patches on the earth are mistaken by the insects for pools of water; or at least the resemblance is strong enough to waken the old primeval instinct of their kind to hover above ponds and sluggish streams.

One often speaks thus of gnats playing or dancing together, without meaning more than, as in this case, that a cloud of them has been seen hovering in company in one small space of air. But do insects never play in the literal sense of the word? Here at least is something difficult to describe as other than an organised insect game.

Upon the broad, oozy margin of the pond, on this hot and gusty summer's morning, a very curious thing is taking place. The flat, wet space of earth at the waterside is thronged with queer-looking flies, engaged in what appears exactly like a hotly contested bout of "cross-touch" between two differently appavelled teams. Though all are winged alike—white-edged wings with black tips—about equal proportions of the host have their thoraces glittering gold or vivid emerald green. The whole company keeps up an incessant hopping and twirling movement; and the game seems to be for a fly of one colour to touch another of the opposing hue, the latter either skilfully evading the attempt or passing on the issue, exactly as children do in the ancient pastime.

None of the flies gets on the wing, this apparently being against the laws of the game. All is done by leaps and sudden flanking movements; and it is impossible to disregard the obvious fact—that the sport is infused throughout with a rough, yet good-humoured jocularity, strangely reminiscent of the sports of men.



And there is a still further point of resemblance. Just as a whole moiling, skurrying football field is brought to a sudden dead halt by the referee's whistle, so the green-and-gold-clad insect-players are subject to temporary halts in their game. It is the whistling summer wind that is the referee in their case. When a gust of it swoops down on their playground, all are perfectly still in a moment, holding on to the sodden surface until the breeze has passed.

To find the path over the sea-marshes through the dense white morning mist is neither an easy nor unadventuresome thing. A false or hasty step is very likely to precipitate the wayfarer over head and ears into any one of the innumerable winding dykes that, in clear weather, may be seen tracing zigzags of molten silver everywhere through the breast-high green.

The only safe procedure is to feel for the worn footway carefully at every step. And even this is not always possible. Sometimes the only thing is to halt and keep stock-still for long minutes together until the direction of the beaten way is momentarily revealed. For though the whole world-wide low-lying marshland, and sea, with high shingle-bank between, is utterly lost in the shining white vacuity of the morning, you soon realise that the indriven sea-mist is not all of equal density. It lies in slowly-moving strata, some thick and impenetrable to sight as bales of Witney blanket-fleece, some of so gauzy a texture that rarely a glint of dyke or a yard or two of water-logged verdure may be dimly seen.

To win a way into the heart of these Dorset sea-

marshes thus, with the first practicable light of the shrouded summer's morning, is to gain entry to a new world little suspected by those who hug close to the haunts of men. No sign of living creature can be made out, yet the muffled air around me is instinct with the murmur of busy waking life. Hither, at the red close of every day, countless flocks of gulls come in from the sea, to roost among the thick grass-bents. They are rousing now as the fog begins to lighten overhead, and with every minute more and more of them are getting on the wing, calling to each other through the silvery void, or splashing invisibly around me in the sedgy pools.

Every now and then a different cry goes by above, something like the comfortable, disjointed chippering of swallows in the air, but somewhat harsher, and I know the little terns are up and doing. That slow, plaintive note, indescribably sweet and solemn, pealing out far to the right hand and immediately answered as far again to the left, is the call of a redshank to his straying mate.

In every thicket of reeds I pass, some wild thing is stirring on its day's new business, and there is scarce a moment but one takes to the water with clear, ringing, musical plunge. Once I stop where the sedges are almost waist-high about the path, and the glittering, formless miasma enclosing everything, seems denser than ever—pull up short, because a very torrent of shrill contentious voices is bearing down upon me, and I fear to crush some heedless creature under-foot. The mountain-freshet of sound, shrill voice and whirr and beat of wings, hurtles about my



feet for a moment, then is suddenly still. The next moment I am straining ear and eye upward, this last baffling wonder forgotten in something more wonderful yet. Serene and joyous, and ineffably remote, the first lark has begun his morning carol, and I know that far above the mist-dungeoned sea-marshes there are sunshine and summer skies of blue.

At last—summer sun over a summer sea, with the tide all but at the full, and the south wind stripping the foam from the wave-crests and carrying it in shuddering, iridescent clots far up the steep shelving beach.

This is the hour when the terns begin their daily hunt along the water's edge. You can see them half a mile away down the pebbly shore, looking like a cloud of snowflakes whirling in the sunshine, and hear their shrill high voices borne over to you in a medley of faint broken sound through the rhythmic surge of wind and sea.

But as they draw nearer, you make out that they are not really moving in close company. The little white gulls are spread out in fairly open order over a long stretch of the shore, flying some eight or ten feet above water-level, and each narrowly scrutinising the surface beneath him as he slowly fares along.

This daily flight of the terns, just as the tide is reaching its full, makes one of the prettiest sights to be met with on a sea-shore ramble at this time of the year. Seabirds, as a rule, though they have forceful dexterity of movement, exhibit little grace or comeliness of gait. But the tern is as skilful and dainty on the wing as any swallow.

And he adds to it all something that perhaps no

other seabird has the world over—a pleasant reiteration of notes that might almost be called a song. Here again the tern reminds one curiously of the swallow. His voice has a like volubleness and continuity. It is the same chattering refrain upon the sun-steeped summer air; only it lacks the swallow's comfortable sweetness, and this of necessity. For a seabird's voice must ever be harsh and shrill, to contend with the clamour of the sea.

Every now and then the watcher may see one bring up stock-still in the sunshine, all save a backward quivering motion of the wings. Now he looks—but in snow-white miniature—exactly like a hovering kestrel-hawk, his forked tail bent under him, his beak pointing straight down.

So still he keeps for the moment that you can mark the cruel crafty eyes under the jet-black poll—eyes that can pierce the waterdeeps as the kestrel's the tangle of meadow grass and sedge. And then up go his wings, their sharp points meeting over his back, and down he drops like a falling stone, vanishing after his sighted quarry into the trough of foam-marbled, swaying green.

One of the strangest sights to be met with at this time by holiday wanderers along our wilder and less frequented sea coasts, such as those of Devon and Cornwall, is a group of cormorants engaged in drying or, rather, draining their wings.

Ranged in open order along some narrow rocky ledge of the cliff overhanging the water, the big, sombre, rakish-looking birds stand on tiptoe, lean, long necks and heads craned aloft, and great vanes outstretched to the uttermost quivering and dripping in the sunshine—they look like a com-



pany of fantastically-clad water-mountebanks lifting arms together before making a simultaneous plunge into the sea.

There is no particular reason why the cormorants, and their smaller replicas, the shags, should take all this trouble to free their wings from the salt-water after every dive, seeing that they are in and out of the sea constantly all the summer morning through. The razorbills and guillemots, who undoubtedly use their wings as propellers when swimming under water, exhibit nothing resembling this peculiar trait, while the cormorants and shags move beneath the surface entirely by means of their webbed feet. The wings so sedulously cared for when the birds are out of the water are always held closely folded to the body throughout the whole time of submersion; or, at least, that is the general consensus of opinion among all who have been able to observe the act.

But it is far from easy to learn anything at first hand about the doings of this alert and wary fisher-fowl. Many of the commonly accepted facts about them are traditional—handed down from generation to generation among the sea-coast dwellers from the remote time when "cormorant-flying" was an established and popular sport. In bygone centuries cormorants were trained to catch fish just as the peregrine falcon was trained for the chase in the coverts and fields. Rich and poor seem alike to have been addicted to this useful pastime of cormorant flying. Even the Kings of England, notably James I., had each his royal "Master of the Cormorants."

Both cormorants and shags appear invariably

to swallow their prey whole immediately after landing it. Some old Devon fishermen assert that this is done while the bird is still under water. But a little careful watching soon reveals the truth that the small dabs and plaice, which constitute the main part of the cormorant's diet, are frequently brought to the eyrie before being consumed. Then, however, there is no doubt of the way in which the catch is disposed of—it is taken down at a single gulp.

Mid-August wanderings on the countryside commonly bring one face to face with what proves to most a startlingly unexpected sight. Where all the woods and lanes are still in their full opulence of summer greenery, a sudden turn of a leafy corner may bring into view a wayfaring-tree loaded to the summit with scarlet fruit.

Scarlet is the only word indeed for these heaped clusters of wayfaring-berries, but the word is pitifully inadequate to convey any real notion of their intensely vivid hue. Seen in the mass, it comes nearer to a true blood-red than, perhaps, the colour of any other growing thing. Yet, for all its splendour, it must not be mistaken for the colour of ripeness. Ripe wayfaring-berries are black as jet. Each oval fruit in turn makes a sudden change of hue—it is an incessant game of *rouge-et-noir* in the hedgerows—and the moment the fruit is ripe it must be eaten by the birds, or it quickly shrivels and rots away.

The process is already in full activity, though no other wild fruit is yet within measurable distance of the edible stage. Examined closely, each head of clustered fruit is seen to be half



glittering scarlet and half intense black, the interplay upon the eye of the two strongly-contrasted shades explaining no doubt the gorgeous impression caused on first sight of the tree.

Those whose pleasure it is to look on at the pageant of wild growth year by year are little likely to fall into error here, but the chance sojourner on the countryside often confuses the wayfaring-tree with the dogwood, and even with the service-tree. The latter is really akin to the rowan, and is readily distinguishable by its deeply-cleft leaves.

There is some reason for confounding the other two, as both have a downiness of leaf and stalk in the younger shoots and their foliage is much of the same character. But the berries of the dogwood are of an uniform dingy hue. Its real value to the lover of brilliant colour lies in its extraordinarily beautiful autumnal tints, the leaves fading and fading through an infinite gradation of red and purple tones.

A peculiarity of the wayfaring-tree is that though its leaves are still as green as ever at this time, it has already made notable advance in its preparation for next year's growth. At the apex of every leaf and fruit-laden branch there is a fat grey woolly bud, with a pair of erect leaves elongated but tightly furled as yet, above and below.

When the wheat was still green and full of poppy-scarlet and cornflower-blue, and riddled through and through with the summer sun, it seemed that sheer dominant intensity of colour could be carried to no further pitch, either by nature or device of man. But now, when it stands

ripe and ready for the sickle, thirty acres of it filling the valley between wood and wood, all that pales into insignificance.

Under the fierce glow of the August sun, the colour of fully ripened wheat is literally more than human eye can long endure. The poppies and cornflowers are still there, crowding the burning amber deeps with a more vivid lustre than ever. But their light is utterly quenched in the greater light from the myriad sunburnt wheaten stems—such a lambent splendour of colour as one might conceive given off by some gargantuan crucible full to the brim with red-hot gold.

Those who are beginning to deplore the imminent end of summer, and affect to regard the countryside now as but a declining radiance day by day, are merely letting old conventions blind them to the true facts. Though the colours of the year's maturity are on the wane, the richer hues of its fruition are only just nearing their full loveliness. The devotee of bright colour in the mass can roam hill and dale at this time, and find more than ever for his delight and solace.

When these provinces of glowing corn are swept away, there are the lanesides and riversides, downs and purple moorlands, all running sky-high with new treasure of living beauty authentic to summer's end. Every stream has its fringe of crimson loosestrife and sweet, fresh carmine of willow-herb, and every highway its garland of yellow ragwort stretching sometimes for unbroken miles.

But it is the by-roads and unfrequented lanes that serve more completely than all else to dissipate the old illusion that the passing of



summer means the beginning of the end to all things possessed of the loveliness of life, rather than what it really is—but a change from glory to glory.

The hedgerows are more burdened with beauty than ever. The great bindweed swings its snow-white bells in every gap, and the little lilybind makes a broad flange of pink and silver to the beaten track like milk and wine spilt in the dust. Marjoram, that ever waits for the ripening of the corn before breaking into blossom, is filling the sunshine of all the lanes with cresting rosy foam.

Long curving stems of sulphur-hued mullein stand up in the tangle of wayside growth like spurts of pure flame, and all the bramble-brakes are thick sown with living jewellery—the flowers set so close together that it is hard to thrust a fingertip between.

A thing that you can very easily pass by—that is familiar indeed perhaps not to one in a thousand—is the way the common stinging-nettle contrives to fertilise its flowers.

This is brought about neither wholly by the wind, as with the hazel, nor by the direct and indispensable agency of insects, as in so many other plants. It is true that all sorts of creeping and flying atoms throng the nettle-thickets at blossoming-time, and by these the fertilising process is undoubtedly expedited and rendered more complete. But, if need be, the nettle-plant can see to the matter quite well on its own account without any adventitious aid.

If you go to a nettle-patch on any warm, still day in August, and watch carefully, you will soon notice a truly astonishing thing. The nettle-

stems are all about of a height, each topped with a spray of dull purplish-green flower-buds. The green of the leaves and this dingy inflorescence unite in a plane of tangled growth stretching maybe half a dozen yards between the laneside and the hedgerow. And over the entire breadth of this plane of nettle-tops, little white puffs of what looks exactly like far-off battle smoke, are incessantly breaking out in the sunshine and drifting, dwindling away into nothing on the faintly moving breeze.

If you could suppose yourself on a hill-top looking down upon a wide green-coppiced valley wherein a brisk engagement between artillery was in progress, here, in miniature, is exactly what you would see—a broad sunlit expanse of wooded country with but the one sign of the deadly business going forward; guns and gunners alike invisible in the deep cover, and only the quick short bursts of smoke showing at intervals here and there in the smiling peaceful green.

And now look closer into the maze of nettle-blooms, and try to make out precisely what is happening. The queer, curved, many-branched sprays are thick-studded with flower-buds, some as yet only tiny green knobs, some all but ready to burst. Among them here and there is a full-blown flower scarce larger than the buds indeed, yet wide open now and enshrining a little whorl of yellow anthers.

While you are staring into the green jungle noting all this, the spurts of mimic cannon-smoke are breaking out all round your zone of sight, far and near. It may be a minute or so before the eye catches one of the nettle-guns exactly on the



instant of its firing. The gun may go off of its own accord, or some wandering insect may set its trigger free. But sooner or later, if you have come at the right time, verging on towards noon, the nettles will yield up to you their secret. You will see the bud split asunder, spreading its four yellow fingers out like a suddenly unclasped fist; and the little cloud of pollen-dust goes sailing off, to vanish instantly in the mazy verdant deeps.

As the corn yields up its green hue of life and takes on the yellow tinge of coming harvest, so the wild birds cease to sing.

The two processes are so gradual as to be almost imperceptible until each is complete. And then there comes a morning in early August when one is awakened not by a glad ripple of music but by a strange quietude below in the dew-drenched garden. Looking forth under the fringe of glittering diamond drops that tremble along the eaves, one sees a hillside of pure gypsy-gold heaped up and radiant in the morning sun. The wheat is ready for the sickle. Mother Earth has done her part, and, resting at last, all living things seem to rest with her.

There is a quiet chippering undertone in the garden-close, and a sleepy hum of bees in the plane of rosy sainfoin beyond. But in the whole wide valley that lies between the village and the golden hill, scarce another sound breaks the morning stillness. Far away on the upland to the north, where they are mowing crimson trefoil, you can hear the machine-men against the sky-line calling to their teams.

And yet it is going very wide of the truth to speak of this time of summer quietude among the

birds as "silence." There is no real silence anywhere, or at any time, on an English countryside; and even now hardly an hour goes by but some bird or other remembers bygone times and ventures a bar or two of its old familiar music.

To-day, while the morning was still young, a willow-warbler came and sang in the clump of silver birches by the laneside. Larks have been up and carolling over the village on and off the whole day through. Scarce an hour but the ring-dove in the little oak wood beyond the garden has been measuring the moments with her drowsy chime. Even when there was no actual song, such an universal chirruping and exchange of call-notes filled the sultry summer air far and wide that the general remission of music among the commoner song-birds at this time brings with it little sense of loss.

One thing that is almost due now, coming indeed ever with a shock of regret to the true bird-lover, is the final departure of the swifts.

At this season of calm bright evenings one has grown so used to seeing a great company of swifts charging round the blue sky with their weird, resounding chorus, that summer seems no longer summer without them. When they go, as may happen any day now, a real break comes in the year's melody. But it is only the heaviness that endures for a season. The joy of the morrow's morning may well be a whole new avalanche of robin-song. When the wild, free hunting chorus of the swifts stills in the evening sky, it is wellnigh infallible token that this so-called "summer silence" is nearing its end. With the return of the robins from the deep woods to the habitations of



men there can be no more thought of silence among our song-birds. It almost seems as if the robins waited until the last echo of the swifts' jubilant concerto died away, and then started as with one accord on their homeward trek.

The week that is now ending—earlier perhaps in some favoured districts, and still not yet in others, but notably this past week for most localities—has brought to the countryside a general resumption of robin's song.

The return of the robins to their old haunts round about the villages marks unerringly the dividing-line between summer and autumn. The little wrens have been singing freely at all times of day for a fortnight past. But there is nothing seasonal in the song of the wren. Whether in April or November, it is just the same slender, sibilant, cascading note, and endlessly reiterated monotone that would soon grow irksome, but for its unfailing brightness—the simplest and cheeriest of all English wild birds' songs.

Robin-music is very far from simple, and what brightness it possesses is little more than after-glow; more remembrance than real effulgence. Saving the blackbird's and the nightingale's, the robin's song, though in a very different spirit, comes nearer to a human quality of expression than any other. Yet it deals only with the half-lights, the sober, reflective side of things. Go out now into a village garden, or, better still, the adjacent woodlands, on any of these crisp, glamorous, dew-soaked mornings, and, though the calendar tells you it is still high summer, note the unmistakably autumnal ring in every stanza of the robin's song.

It is no mournful music, this of the robin. The old conventional idea of autumn as a season of decay and sadness, if it were ever more than a sick town-fancy, has no warrant to country eyes and ears kept honestly open in these frank days. With the passing of summer, the failure of pot geraniums on a London windowsill may well bring sad thoughts of dearth and death to come. But autumn in the country is no more than a breathing spell, the year's unbuckling of its armour between one exploit and another; just a brief halt at a journey's end, to count up the gains of one venture brought to ripe issue ere setting forth reaccounted and ready for the next.

And this is the spirit that infuses the robin's song when, as August passes its meridian, the ruddy breasts begin to show again in the depths of hedgerow green picked out by the level sunbeams of morning and evening, and the old quaint halting melody returns. The blackbird voices the energy and momentum of young life—the up and doing and daring spirit. The nightingale takes to herself all the emotional and sentimental paraphernalia. But the robin calls a welcome halt to both. Youth is not all, or even the greater part of life, either to humanity or to seasons. And those well on towards the grand climacteric of their days, who find autumn sweeter with every year that glides by, grow to welcome the return of the robin's song at this time with ever greater and greater pleasure.

For these, the secret of its charm lies in its undisturbing tranquil beauty, without effort or aspiration, like the music that still throbs in bells long after the eager clappers are at rest.



The little robins, singing in the garden-close, sweeten every hour of sunshine for the village-dweller to-day.

It is only when the robins get back—as they always do at this time of year—from the solitary woodlands to their old haunts among men, and their tender, winsome song begins once more to pervade the gardens, that one realises how quiet the village has been these many weeks back. All through July, and now far into August, one has been able to detect scarce sound of bird about the house, save the chippering song of martins under the eaves and the noisy contention of sparrows in the old ivied walls. But the long summer silence has broken at last.

Yet there is no disguising the fact that the robin's tuneful, diffident refrain has nothing in it akin to summertime. Overhead, an almost tropic sun still lords it in the blue. But the robins are back in the village gardens from their long sojourn in the woods, and there is no blinking the truth—the summer is very near its close.

Old conventions often die hard. Many go on thinking, and some few writing, of the nightingale as exclusively a night songster, and of the redbreast as unvarying herald of winter frosts and snows. But, as all country-folk know, the nightingale sings as much by day as by night, and the rigours of winter are the robin's chief aversion. In fact, the redbreast has an inveterate dislike of all extremes. He is a singer of the half-moods, the temperate golden mean of life. Listen to him now in the shady deeps of the orchard-close. Every note of the song breathes of autumn, its tranquillity, its assured achievement, its fullness of

content. It is rather recitative than melody : soliloquy more than communicated phrase. The robin just sits in his green dim apple-bower, conning over to himself the sum of the year's award of things and finds some so good that his song must break forth in little swift rills of joy, and others so debatable as to need but sober undertone with more than a tinge of melancholy.

Yet it is all so sweet and fresh, so unstudied, that one reaches out sudden welcoming arms to autumn, and the heart falls to singing with the bird.



THE NINTH MONTH  
SEPTEMBER





## THE NINTH MONTH

### SEPTEMBER

Autumn rain—Autumn glories—Where autumn is spring—  
The Kaleidoscope—Flowers within flowers—Downland  
flowers—The swarming of the ants—Stoats and weasels—  
Voices of the night—Song-thrush and missel—Wheatears  
—The berry harvest—Poppies in September—Nutting-  
time.

THE sound of rain on September leaves is quite different from that on the fresh young foliage of early summer. Here in the wood the steady downpour makes, near at hand, a dry, hard, pattering note, merging afar off into a general crisp, whispering hubbub, more like the voice of wind in ripe oats than a sound of falling water.

It lacks the music inherent in all young life. Though the wood is still green, and will scarce show a blemish of autumnal hues until October is done, the leaves have lost their suppleness and sappy permeation. The raindrops fall upon them as upon sculptured leaves of stone, and with as little responsiveness.

And as it is with the rain over woodlands in early autumn, so it is with the light. The old translucence of the summer leaves is gone. The woods will never be so dark in all the year as they are now, towards the sundown of the long drenching September day. Even in the open rides there is but a dim, half-light abroad, and, threading your way through the labyrinth of densely over-shadowed tracks, you constantly come upon long

winding stretches where deep night seems to have settled down already.

These dark, blind regions in the wood are strangely, almost uncannily, silent and bereft of life. Instinctively you hurry through them, tripping at every step, and when the gloom begins to lighten ahead of you once more, and the scurry of a rabbit sounds in the undergrowth, ear and eye greedily seize upon these as they would upon the voice and glance of a friend.

Coming out of the wood at last on to the broad hillside, you look across a valley grey and blurred with rain to the far horizon, where, in happier times, the sun would be setting red among the pine-tops. There is no sunlight now, nor hope of sunlight. Yet, as the dusk draws on, a curious change in the quality of the light begins to assert itself. The rain drums down harder than ever. The sky is as densely overcast as it has been any moment since the sousing dawn.

But by infinite degrees, and in no quarter more than another, the whole drab, lowering heaven has suffused with a delicate rosy glow. Green of grass and woodland fails and fades into this soft resplendence. The hillside flowers, white yarrow and lemon-weed and purple scabious, take to themselves the same pale orient tinge. The brooks, chequer-boarding the grassy levels, turn to threads of shining coral. Even the rain reddens as it falls.

Something there is about these wet autumn days ending in such a light—something of the quality of pure elation for, as the light comes, the wood behind you, so glumly mute a moment ago, breaks into sudden song. The ringdoves fall to



crooning, and the moping robins set up a glad ripple far and near. A green woodpecker loops by, mocking, yet obviously sympathising with the general exultation. The distant rookery raises a merry clamour. Though the light endures but a moment or two, the dismal spirit of the day is gone.

Next morning, out in the open fields the morning was dim enough under the steady rain and grey, quiet sky, but here in the beech wood there is gloom that might almost be a laggard remnant of the night.

And yet it is possible to see wonderfully far on every hand. In beech woods the trees do not crowd together nor is there ever more than sparsest undergrowth. The grey, smooth stems stand wide apart on a bare floor spread sombrely with last year's leaves, and overhead the trees link their living foliage together, so that the wood is like a vast hollow shell of matted leafage, through which the light filters, changing the very air to liquid emerald, as though one were walking at the bottom of a deep, green sea.

So it is all the summer long, and so it is to-day, despite the drab pall of sky and drizzling rain above. Only there lies in wait for you this autumn morning such a surprise, such a shock of splendid colour, as is met with at this time of year alone, and then only by the inveterate wanderer abroad in all weathers. Turning a corner of the path, you come suddenly upon a spot where there is a break in the woodland canopy, and the sombre way lies open to the sky. Almost at your very feet there gleams a broad, intensely brilliant patch of ruddy golden light, so vivid, so dazzling,

that you half-believe you have chanced upon a spurt of subterranean fire.

But it is neither fire nor errant sunbeam, equally impossible on such a weeping, shrouded day. It is merely the first fresh clot of fallen leaves, and the beech is ever the earliest to give this warning note of the imminent autumnal change. Often it is but a single tree in the whole wood that begins the conflagration. Hidden by its fellows, it gradually bronzes over unseen by human eye, until it stands clad from head to foot in burning gypsy-gold. And then the glittering spangles commence to fall, and, ever-reddening where they gather under the white, steep shaft of daylight, form at length this resplendent burst of colour.

Ever the beeches first. And then little flares of yellow begin to mark the lanesides where the hedge-maples grow, and the brambles turn crimson, and the hazel-leaves rim and blotch with purple-brown. After these, the elm-grove starts its aerial alchemy. Then the birches sprinkle their green robes with amber sequins, and the sycamores light their scarlet beacons in every wood. Last of all, the oaks—just smouldering sullenly away into grim, wintry nakedness brown leaf by leaf.

Until but a few days back, the lane, with its high hedgerows and overspreading oaks, seemed the quietest spot on earth. You trod the green-grown solitary track, passing from long zone to zone of grey shade through slants of hazy, midget-haunted sunshine, and heard no more than a single trill from a robin, or a bar or two of silvery soliloquy from a hiding wren.

But to-day all that is changed. The slender



music of the wren and redbreast is there still, but it is obliterated, forgotten, in the new, great song that is lifting from the mountains of blossoming ivy in the hedges and from every green-swaddled tree-trunk by the way. With earliest glimpse of morning light, the first honey-bees were out and busy in the ivy-bloom; and now, at sunny mid-day, there is a veritable tornado of music from end to end of the lane. And not only hive-bees literally by the thousand-thousand. There are blue-flies and green-flies, humble-bees and wasps and butterflies and hoarse-voiced erystalis, a horde of winged, jostling creatures in amber and pearl and steely-green or blue, and glittering black; and every tiny nameless thing that can fly or climb high enough to take its share in the ivy-feast. Standing midway in the length of sun-and-shadow-barred lane, one sees that the whole erstwhile green barricades of ivy-smothered hedgerow are coloured with the open flowers as though it had been raining gold-dust all night long.

It is good, on a country ramble, to come by chance upon this amazing sight, and be reminded that autumn has its genesis of life as well as spring. But it is better still to have been familiar with it of old and have expected, watched, its coming these many weeks back.

A strange old plant is the ivy green, in nothing stranger than in the time and manner of its blossoming. When the suns of April are urging all other growths into a glory of colour and procreative life, the old ivy drowns by the wayside, dingy and dry, and inert save in the shedding of its used-up winter leaves. All the summer long it resists the call of the sunniest hours. But when

September arrives the true springtime flood of growth and life returns to the countryside in this late blossoming of the rare old ivy green.

Everywhere beneath its mantle of sombre, shiny foliage, clusters of minute green knobs appear. These grow apace and spread, lengthening their stalks until each cluster looks like a pincushion stuck full of pins with monstrous heads. Now these flower-bud nurseries stand out above the old leaves and become the most conspicuous growth of the hedgerow. Finally each green knob splits at its apex; five little segments fold back, like an opening star-trap, letting five buff-tipped anthers spring into the light, and disclosing a yellow-green oval fairly dripping with sweets. In a single morning the colour of the whole lane is changed from green to gold.

"The Kaleidoscope." It got the name from a first vision of it one fair September morning long ago; and ever after, at this time of year, its changing splendour of colour and life recalls the trumpery metaphor.

It is just a bit of narrow lane skirting the foot of a great shoalback hill on the brink of the Sussex downs. On the one hand a towering hedge cuts off all view of the lowlands; on the other, the flower-gemmed sward springs sheer from the edge of the white chalk track, and sweeps away soaring until it brings up suddenly far aloft against the intense blue of the southern sky. It is the bank under the hedgerow where the whole morning's sunshine seems to have collected, that gives the place its trivial, unsufficing name.

Up in the high hedge there are wreaths of



blossoming clematis and pink bramble-bloom, and strings of bryony-berries like cherries, green and yellow and red, and great alcoves full of ripe way-farer-fruit burning like Moses' bush in the sun. Below these, but still higher than a man's head, stand sulphur spires of mullein and a very thicket of hemp-agrimony, the most beautiful growth of the waysides to-day—ripple beyond ripple of breaking rosy foam. Then comes the marjoram, deep rich magenta-purple in the clustered buds, but the open flowers making a soft amethystine mist all along the bank. Lower still, crimson calamint and violet harebell, ragwort and yarrow, and white archangel, knapweed, mallow, camomile.

But these are all abiding things; though they are for ever trembling and bending in the stir of western air, you can look upon their loveliness for as long as you will. It is the butterflies that give the illusive, kaleidoscopic quality to this shy nook of country lane. In sober truth, there are thousands of them foregathered at this, the great annual love-tryst of their kind.

Looking down the lane, you can see their brilliant colours lifting and falling in the sunshine, just as though the flowers themselves were getting incessantly upon the wing. Gorgeous red-admirals, and peacocks with their gay heraldry of crimson and tawny velvet set with mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshells flashing their burnished copper mirrors from every head of dandelion, brimstones sailing by like magic carpets of cloth-of-gold, great white butterflies breaking out snowy spinnakers all around you, and furling, spreading them again, as swiftly as you look. And amidst all, a sort of undertow of tender shimmering azure—the little

blue butterflies more plentiful than any—for ever dimming the bright eyes of golden ragwort and ruby calamint with their cold pure hues.

This yellow ragwort, which all through July and August has been flooding the waysides and woodland clearings, is nearing the end of its beauty. The centre of each high-poised, glowing nebula of blossom is slowly whitening as the earliest flowers to bloom ripen their seedpods, every seed equipped with its own little floss-silk parachute ready to drift away on the passing breeze.

The ragwort is typical of a kind of flowers with a very singular trait. To the naked eye, each spreading umbel consists of a multitude of single flowers of quite simple construction—a central dome surrounded by a ring of bright, yellow, daisy-like rays, each ragwort bloom, at first glance, looking exactly like a common field-daisy, but done all in gold.

Daisy and ragwort, indeed, have a near kinship in the fact that, with each, the flower is not what it seems to the casual eye—a separate, simple, star-like form; but, in reality, it embodies a hundred or more distinct, individual flowers in one. Though a spirit of seemingly reckless, spendthrift prodigality infuses nearly all that nature does, ragwort and daisy and the like were begotten of Mother Earth in one of her rare penurious moods. A hundred of their flowers must be content to proffer a single chalice between them, for all it be of fine gold.

The thing cannot easily be made out unless a strong glass be brought to bear on one of these curious flowers. The daisy is the most typical. It is the daisy's golden eye which is the true daisy,



or rather the multitude of them : the banner of shining white petals is only a show-sign hung out to lure the winged passer-by. Under the glass, the daisy's eye is seen to be made up of innumerable buds massed together side by side, each of which in turn expands into a five-petalled yellow blossom centred by a golden pollen-rod, the whole curiously like the male vegetable-marrow flower in miniature.

These buds are continually opening, blooming a while, then fading away into dun shreds. The operation begins at the circumference and works steadily inward, the central buds being the latest to develop. In warm, bright weather the flowers may come to maturity in quick succession; cold and gloom, especially in the daisy which shuts up at the least chill, may indefinitely protract the process. But the strange thing is that the encircling whorl of petals keeps its shining freshness for so long as, but no longer than, its attractive work is needed. When the last bud has opened and has been duly fertilised, the rings of gold or silver fail and fall.

Seen from the village in the grey, still September morning, the greyest, most dejected region in the whole glum landscape is the far-off sagging line of the downs.

To go thither in search of colour and life seems the least promising enterprise in the world. But the downland is full of unexpected things. The flowers that love these high-lying wastes, though each is but a minute replica of its great flaunting fellows of the lowlands, make up by sheer numbers what they lack in size. Those who come to the

Sussex downs at the end of summer, and see them in the distance so bare and grey, are always astonished at the real richness and vividness of growth with which hill and dale are spread.

Once the first great shoalback hill is past, the wanderer finds himself in a veritable arcanum of loveliness. The barren, sunburnt cast, which, from below, the downs appear to wear, is now seen to be only a blend of every conceivable living colour. Except for the heather and the harebells, there are scarce any unfamiliar to the lowland dweller. The deep, soft grass is studded thick with pink and white clover, golden hawkbit, an infinity of daisies, and even buttercups, pale mauve of scabious, glowing purple of knapweed and star-thistle, yarrow white and red, dandelions in plenty still, and a little white umbel more ubiquitous than any, each of its trim discs a study in delicate, reticent grace.

All familiar hedgerow flowers; nothing of mountain strangeness about them. Yet each but half the size of its valley prototype, and all shorn of their long stems—set deep in the sheltering grass-bents harmless of the rough winds: so hidden that you seem to be carrying a charmed circle of flower-shine as you move; a dozen yards ahead the brown, upstanding grasses hide all from the view.

But the true downland flowers of autumn—the blue harebells and rose-red heather—these uplift themselves everywhere in bold beauty, and colour the landscape wherever one looks. The grey light has no more power to dim the crimson of the heather than it can quench the murmur of its countless besieging bees. While the heather honey-flow lasts, and autumn chills forbear,



neither shade nor shine can still the rich labour-chant of the hive-bees; even in determinedly showery weather, so that it be warm, the heather is never without its singing host.

But the harebells are for the butterflies alone, and most of all for the little blue butterflies that swarm upon the downs at this season. Not one is visible now. Where they get to on grey days such as these—or even when a bit of cloud gets into the sun's eye for a moment—is a mystery.

But the drab mantle of the sky is wearing thin already. A long curving silvery rent shows in it to windward, or at least in that direction where the wind would be if there were any perceptible air astir. In an hour, perhaps, the sun and the butterflies will be out together, and then you will see these frail blue harebells doing strange things. For it will be just as though they had taken to themselves wings, flitting hither and thither in the sunshine; so exactly alike are the azure flowers and the flecks of living azure that share their being.

On the grey, still September morning, with the sheep and cattle lying down in the fields, and but a stray robin or two breaking the autumnal quietude with his slender plaint, it is almost startling to come upon a cloud of swarming ants at some odd turn in the lane.

Loitering under the hedgerows, you suddenly find yourself enveloped by an aerial host of what you take to be midges. The air is misty and dim with their incredible numbers. They spread from about the level of your shoulders to the highest

spray of the hedge-top—thousands upon thousands of minute, dark-winged forms.

These are the little black ants, using their newly-begotten soaring powers in the most thrilling adventure of their lives—the great annual mating-flight of their kind. Hitherto they have been nothing but lowly toilers upon earth, their most daring enterprise the ascent of a grass-blade, or a wandering cruise up a tree-trunk in search of aphid-juice. But now, for a short half-hour, there has come to them a mysterious dual gift—both the desire and the means to fly.

The books on entomology give us the why and the wherefore of this curious habit of the ants in a few terse, confident lines. But it is wonderful how much more there is to learn if an ordinary pair of eyes be carried abroad and turned upon the matter.

First, it is seen that these ant-swarms are always hovering in the lee of some thick high bush, and this even on the calmest days. Then there is definite order observable in the proceeding, for all it seem at first glance but a chaotic whirl of adventitious atoms. The swarm preserves a distinct and characteristic shape in mid-air; a long oval, pointed at the top which is next the bush. Though each ant is flying in its own circle, and these inextricably mingled, there is a common progress upward; and the pace of flight increases as the highest zone is reached.

Where the cloud of circling insects almost touches the green elder-spray, the speed of their intertwining movements wholly baffles the eye—they make together but a grey blur in the air. And every fraction of a second a pair can be



seen to lock and fall, making a dark wavering vertical streak upon the grey.

But the most curious thing is yet to tell. All the black-ant swarms I have ever seen have been accompanied by a smaller swarm of true midges of infinitely tinier form. These midges constitute a sort of advance-guard for the ants, hovering just between the highest point of the ant-swarm and the adjacent foliage, hundreds of them, indeed, being clustered thick upon the leaves.

Bee-masters aver that the honey-bees when swarming always send out scouts to select a gathering-point in advance—do the midges scout for the ants?

Across the sunny woodland "ride" from gloom to gloom—tumbling helter-skelter out of darkness into light and back into darkness again—went the rat and weasel locked together in a deadly embrace.

Though I saw them but a moment, I knew it was a weasel who had the rat in grip, by the flash of white showing now and then as the pair rolled madly over and over. And there was no mistaking the low scream of mingled fury, terror and pain that had so suddenly rent the woodland quietude. No other creature but a rat—least of all a great grey buck rat like this one—would have had quite the same power of putting so many various meanings into one shrill outcry, choked and broken as it was.

But the little tragedy was all over in a second or two. The harsh, stifled sound and the gruesome sight vanished together into the deep of the wood. I stood looking at the empty space of

sunlit green across which the pair had charged, pondering many things.

First, as to why gamekeepers wage such ruthless war indiscriminately upon weasel and stoat alike, seeing that it is the stoat only their kind need fear. But every year the harmless weasels—harmless, that is to say, so far as game is concerned—can be seen on the keeper's "gibbet" by the dozen.

In reality the weasel is a creature that all gamekeepers should preserve, rather than seek to exterminate. Its food consists almost entirely of vermin: rats and mice, moles, no doubt many of the smaller wild birds; but it is the rarest thing to find it preying upon game or rabbits.

The larger, stronger, fiercer stoat is the real depredator of the coverts and warrens, and will even raid domestic poultry-runs or attack a hare in its form.

Weasel and stoat are easily to be distinguished even when only a momentary glimpse of them be obtained. First there is the marked difference in size. The weasel who had fastened its deadly grip upon the rat in the wood was actually smaller than its prey, though of greater length in its snake-like, flexible body. Then the throat and underparts of a weasel are pure white, while in the stoat these are of a dull, dirty sulphur yellow.

Finally there is the general colour—a sort of mahogany brown, rich in the weasel but much dingier in the stoat; and the fact that the stoat has a black tip to its tail, the tail of the weasel being throughout of the same chestnut hue as its lithe little body.

At this time of year, it is strange how all the



owls get down to the villages on dark, still nights, especially those following days of raging wind.

The stifled, bubbling screech of the barn-owl can be heard indeed at most seasons, if one chances to be lying awake; and, so that the air be warm, the little owl—the “Frenchy” of the gamekeepers—is never silent for long, day or night. But, as September draws on, the great brown owl, at all other times a devotee of the remote woodland, comes in from his solitary haunts at each fall of darkness, and cries about the chimney-tops by the hour together, mingling his weird wailing song with all the rest.

And yet this nightly chorus of the owls, typical of the waning season, is in the aggregate far from being a dispiriting, melancholy sound. The barn-owl's long, low, strangled note has a touch of grim, inveterate ferocity about it. But the little owl's sharp, shrill call, echoed and re-echoed across the gardens under the tense darkness, strikes the ear almost with a tinge of careless mirth, for all the little “Frenchy” bears the worst name for indiscriminate slaughter of any, by reason of his habit of ranging the woods and fields at all hours of the day, as well as after dark.

The call of the great brown owl, even when heard thus in the small hours of the autumn night, brings no lugubrious feeling with it. The note is a serious, even solemn, refrain; but its undeniably tuneful quality just keeps it on the hither side of mournfulness. To speak of the wood-owl's cry as a beautiful sound, would be perhaps overstraining fancy. Yet it has strength, and a stern sort of sweetness that sets one eagerly listening, even though it be the cause of unwelcome vigils at the end of tired days.

Lying thus in the still midnight hour, and drowsily harkening to this owlet clamour far and near, the question is sure to thrust itself upon one: Why do these creatures, gifted so wonderfully by nature with the power of noiseless aerial progression, yet take so much care to herald their comings and goings in this way? One would think the first hoot of an owl a mile off would serve to drive to safe cover the whole countryside of furred and feathered things.

The truth seems to be that, while all this bandying to and fro of call-notes between foraging mate and mate fulfils some necessary though inscrutable end, it does not really interfere with good hunting. The note may warn, yet it may give no inkling of the direction whence danger is coming. A wild creature will seldom flee until it has made sure of the road to safety; and the hardest thing in the world, to a human ear at least, is to judge the direction, or even distance, of an owl's call at night. It may well be that all this nocturnal hubbub but throws the quarry into a state of transfixed alertness, what time the great-eyed, soundless terror swoops down on whom he will.

Pealing out suddenly over the valley in the grey quiet of the windless dawn, the thrush's song comes like herald of a loved yet long-absent friend's return.

Ever since summer failed, almost the only bird-voice of the countryside has been that of the robin. The spinneys and lanes have been full of robin-music, but the tender, leisurely refrain savours too much of autumn decline. On his resumption of song in the late September of each



year, the thrush, with a single ringing clarion peal at dawn, seems to change the whole order of things.

Thus early in the season his song lasts but a moment or two. It is as though, suddenly remembering himself after his long moping summer silence, he had got out the neglected silver pipe from its forgotten corner; and, in no wise intending to play as yet, nevertheless sent a breath through the dusty keys as promise of melodious days in store. He may not tune up again for a week to come. Or to-morrow's light may grow to a perfect salvo of his stirring, revivifying music. But sooner or later now, he will settle down to his grand rôle of winter's chief musician in good earnest. Little as it seems generally to be known, the close of January ever finds the thrushes in full imperious song.

The missel-thrush, on the other hand, is only occasionally heard until the old year is near its end. His reputation as a songster is something of a mystery to the country dweller unversed in the conventions of the older bird-books. How, indeed, the missel ever rose to the degree of a singing-bird in the estimation of any is a puzzle; seeing that his performance is little more than the wearisome reiteration of a single rather vapid phrase. Such as it is, however, there is plenty of it, once it starts; and it gains immeasurably by the fact that the missel-thrush sings apparently without any regard to wind and weather. Cold or warmth, storm or shine, he carries on indomitably; nor seeks to shelter himself from the elements, no matter how unfriendly they may be.

In this thoroughly British trait lies, perhaps, the secret of his common repute as musician,

otherwise unexplainable. But the sensitiveness of the little song-thrush to the mood of the times is a still finer and more valued thing to one used to being abroad on the green countryside at all seasons. His song grows to be an index of the beatitudes of rural life. When the darkness begins to fall outside the lattice, and one can just make out the flickering bats against the grey east, it is good to learn that the western wind still holds by the fact that a song-thrush is merrily tuning up below in the garden.

And the dawn that breaks austere quiet and chill and crystal-clear save for a half-hearted robin or timorous wren to welcome it, holds no surprises or regrets. One would as soon expect to see roses in the snow as to hear a song-thrush on a nipping raw nor'-western morning.

Wandering over the downs on any of these sunny, still September days, one is sure to come upon a bird that at once arouses curiosity. Though it has no arresting brilliance of hue as seen threading warily through the long dew-diamonded grass, or perching on bramble or juniper, "Foreigner" is written plain on every feather. Its colours, as visible then, are but sober greys and browns; yet the bird wears them in such clear-cut contrast, and in so outlandish, so harlequin, a fashion, that a traveller is inevitably reminded of eastern lands and their flitting, chattering crew.

And when this queer little fowl gets on the wing—as he will instantly do if the observer make but the slightest movement or sound—the association becomes still more complete. For as



he speeds away from you, flying in loops like a finch or woodpecker, his tail-coverts gleam up in the morning sun white as snow.

One of the strangest things about these wheatears, now so common singly upon the downs just before their migratory southward flight, is that, though all the old country books speak of incredible numbers being trapped by the shepherds on the Sussex highlands every autumn, one never sees flocks of wheatears—hardly ever more than two or three together at most. And yet, that they still exist probably in as great numbers as of old, is patent to anyone accustomed to roam these high-lying, lonely wastes in the fall of the year.

The explanation, of course, lies in the fact of the markedly unsociable, solitary habits of the race at these times. Nature seems to spread them out over the land as dust dropped upon water spreads, each atom shunning its immediate fellows.

And a stranger thing still is that the South Down shepherd, who appears to have changed not a jot in any other respect, perhaps, for centuries past, has certainly given up almost entirely now a pursuit that, only a couple of generations back, must have brought in a considerable revenue to his class. Wheatear-trapping to-day is not only an obsolete calling; it is well-nigh a lost art.

For all the wheatear still loves to explore any dark and secret cleft in the sward, as he did of yore, how to construct the little tunnels under the turf, and in what subtle fashion to lay the horse-hair nooses that ensnared the burrowing birds, you shall not gain knowledge of nowadays in half a life's diligent inquiry among the oldest shepherds of the time.

If the coming winter prove a long and rigorous one, it is fairly certain that there will be something very like famine among the wild birds of the land.

Look where one will in southern England now, the signs portending hard times are all too evident. The hawthorn fruit, which forms the main part of the berry-crop, is almost a total failure. With September more than half done, the hedgerows should be already flushing scarlet under their load of fruit. But in a whole day's tramp through any typical stretch of country you will hardly find a dozen bushes fully laden with the fast-ripening haws.

Of the second principal source of winter provender for the feathered creatures of the countryside—the hips, or rose-berries—little that is more reassuring can be said. At a generous estimate, the visible crop is scarce half what it should be in normal years; and for this we have to thank the cold, wet weather which prevailed in June, when most of the roses were blowing. The holly is in slightly better case. Nearly all the bushes show a sprinkling of pale red berries, sparse though it is; but none have the tight-clustered wealth of coral fruit sheathing the whole stem and mounting high in every bush, so characteristic of good holly years.

The danger of all this to our native wild birds lies not so much in the probability of lean days to come with themselves alone dependent on the home store, as in the well-nigh certain event of the berry shortage being prevalent in other countries, thus causing a larger seasonal influx than ever of foreign birds. In some winters these migrants



from the north-west come over in incredible hosts, and sweep the land bare of food wherever they pass. With their home resources for themselves alone, however meagre these may be, and however protracted and severe the winter, our native birds will at least have a chance. But any overplus of foreign starvelings in their midst is sure to precipitate disaster.

Luckily, or providentially, there is something to set in the hither scale. Never, perhaps, did the ivy show greater promise for a superabundant harvest of its queer-looking greenish fruit—no more than promise as yet, indeed, for the ivy is still only just verging on its flowering time. But every swathed tree-stole and mantled hedge and wall is fairly smothered with ivy-buds already throwing out a furtive golden anther or two. It wants but a few days' warm sunshine to bring all out into a glory of yellow blossom, burdening the air with a scent of honey, and luring every bee and wasp and butterfly of the countryside to the bounteous feast.

Harvest is finished on the upland farm, and in every field the jingling ploughs are out breaking the stubbles under the soft autumn sunshine—all but on the "ten-acre," the last spit of cultivable land glowing afar off like a tongue of fire hard against the misty blue wall of the downs.

A strange colour truly for a field in mid-September. Yet there is only one English wild flower that can set a whole hillside aflame at this or any season. Coming to the ten-acre after a long tramp through dew-drenched lane and foot-path, you stand on the brink of the remote solitary field at last, and look out over the scantiest

crop of oats that ever eye beheld; corn which is not worth the reaping, and now never will be reaped, yet which is full of a glad compensation to all but the farmer—a beautiful scarlet underflow of poppies, rich as on any summer's day gone by.

Early as you have come to this forlorn and lovely outpost of human effort, a host of wild creatures are here before you. The upper part of the field is black with rooks and daws scrabbling busily amidst the lean yellow swathes, and filling the air with an unceasing clamour—the deep hoarse note of the rooks playing bass to the jackdaws' high yelping chorus.

The smaller birds are here in numbers past all belief; every sparrow of the countryside seemingly; starlings by the hundred together; linnets, chaffinches, siskins, greenfinches, pigeons; and here and there a white wing lifts in the glowing prospect telling that even the great herring-gulls find here something to their taste. Through the hubbub of rook and daw, and the shrill medley of lesser voices, comes now and again the trumpet of a pheasant and the wheezy call of partridge hiding under the scarlet and gold.

All this high-lying southern country is overrun with hares, and it would be strange if the derelict oat-field had none to show to-day. When the ploughs come at last to turn all under, poppies and abortive crop alike, hares in plenty are sure to get up out of their forms almost from under the horses' very feet, and go racing off like the wind. There is a hare now, but a dozen yards away, moving in the dense poppy-growth; you cannot see him, but you know he is there, for, between every mouthful as he feeds, his black ear-tips are



thrust high aloft searching the air for sounds of danger.

Yet he is not battenning upon the oats, like the rest of the wild things about him. He has come to the field lured by the same sight that brought yourself thither, only to gratify another and more material need. To the hare, a fresh young poppy is at all times an irresistible dainty. Presently, as he ventures out upon a bare spot of ground, you mark his peculiar method of devouring them. It is just like the ancient children's game of bob-cherry. He bites the green poppy-stem off close to the root, and then sits up contentedly chewing it in until the flower, gradually approaching his mouth, at a sudden, sidelong gulp, finally disappears.

Coming down the green "ride" through the hazel wood, you would have known that there were others here before you, even if there had been no far-off murmur of children's voices upon the air.

The jays would have revealed that fact clearly enough. Incessantly their single harsh warning cries ring to and fro in the dim, quiet glades; and whenever you catch sight of one of the birds, he is going at full speed, alarmed yet angry at what he evidently deems an unwarrantable invasion of his rights. Jays, when not moved by a common danger, seem to spend most of the hours of daylight quarrelling. If you manage to get near a party of them, and the sound of their strife continues, it is the surest sign that they still believe themselves alone in the wood.

In this southern county, nutting-time seems to

get earlier with every year. The ancient village rule used to be that the nuts were left until the blackberries were done. But already there are coming in as many baskets heaped up with what looks like pale green foam, as there are baskets sombre and dripping with the luscious bramble fruit.

Old and young alike are off to the woods nutting, but the children make the best gatherers. A hazel-nut always hides under a leaf, and thus is most readily seen from below. The Saturday school holiday brings the young voices betimes into the woodland solitudes, and the jays have not had a word amiss since dawn.

The big hazel-nuts, pale greenish-white blotched with rose, and each set in a dainty, antlered cup of emerald, make lure enough for anyone on this soft September morning. But there is a new wonder, as well as a new beauty, in the woods to-day. Coming to them with thoughts bent only on the season as a time of fruition, of the earth's autumnal rest from labour, one is startled to find not autumn and all it conventionally stands for, but the vigorous life of spring already actively in train.

Every hazel-leaf now has a next season's bud swelling green at the base of its stalk, starving the old leaf of sap, and steadily, inexorably, pushing it off the main twig. And the catkins—the male hazel-flowers that in February will fill the woods with a shower of verdant light—these show everywhere in the labyrinth of branches overhead; pendulous green lobes, three and four together, some fully an inch long, though still tight-closed; a few, indeed, already loosening and lengthen-



ing perilously unmindful of the coming winter days.

It is always the crowded, mutually protecting hazels that first give the quietus thus to the ancient illusion of autumn as a season only of decline and death. But once the truth has been forced upon you of the fat green hazel-buds and swelling catkins in September, you look about wherever you go, and soon realise that the same impulse is upon all growing things. One year's brimming chalice of life drained, nature begins to fill again with the old rich wine without a moment's pause.





THE TENTH MONTH  
OCTOBER





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Wren music—"Red sky in the morning"—The ivy feast—  
The berry harvest—In cider-land—Mystery music—  
Spider courtship—Night voices in autumn—Threshing-  
time.

WHEN the sea-fog is up amongst the hills, and, all the dull quiet morning through, the village roofs and tree-tops are lost in a thick white canopy, the never-ceasing song of the wrens in the gardens just saves the day from being one of dispiriting gloom.

To-day the October dawn was a full hour behind its time, but the wrens had taken no count of that. In the muffled twilight, long before the robins had plucked up heart or the rooks stirred in their eyries, there was a wren singing amidst the dripping apple-boughs under my window as though it were a summer's day.

It is in its inviolability of type, its constancy rather to a temperament than a season, that the value of the wren's song chiefly lies. As the darkness slowly lightened, I lay and listened to the song, and wondered where its blithe content came from in all that chilly shrouded void. Minute after minute the song stemmed on in the silence; no mellow clear pipe tuned with subtle artistry, nor, indeed, anything in it that could be called music. But just a sweet whispered babbling, a running-on of slender silver tones, the one

tripping the other up ceaselessly—a never-ending succession of odds-and-ends of simple pleasant sound, like the low talk of the waterbrooks.

All the songs of English wild birds may be said to have some more than fanciful kinship or other with human feeling, if only lovers of the countryside could agree as to the precise tendency. But there need be little variance of opinion as to where the song of the wrens is to be placed. You cannot listen to the wren year in and year out, in storm or shine, easy times or adverse times, without linking her up inevitably with the sort of simple human nature whose instinct is to make the best and brightest of things.

The robin is hard to daunt. There are few times of year, except in the parching heats of summer, when his quaint recitative fails in the hedgerow. Yet, though he is no fair-weather songster, the robin's hardihood is more than half self-conscious pose, and he ever contrives to put a touch of gentle, fictile melancholy into his gayest measure. He will not own that art can ever tolerate a happy ending, even to the merest trifling stanza of his lay.

But the wren's song is all serene, contented jollity, though it be on so minute and unassuming a scale. Heard in the gloom of the chilly fog-bound morning, it brings a catch to the heart that is almost repentance at dour thoughts too ready in recrimination of the absent sun. Out there in the cold, bedraggled and hungry, shelterless among the soaking apple-boughs, the very air but a less ponderable form of water—still she sings, and sings again, filling the wan, shrouded, moping world with her little bright shreds and tatters of



music, as a darkened chamber will be filled with golden dust-motes by a penetrating beam of light.

Coming out upon the hillside in the first clear light of dawn and looking eastward, I could see nothing of the valley for the dense ground-mist lying far below me like a lake of milk, with here and there the highest tree-tops sharply piercing its level of formless white.

The day was breaking in a flood of silvery light streaming up behind a trellis of deep grey cloud that covered the whole eastern sky—strong, fine, wavering parallels of smoke-pearl grey silhouetted upon the shining horizon wall. The light strengthened. Slowly here and there in the steep dark griddle of cloud there came a spot of tender rose. Almost imperceptibly these touches of soft stealthy colour grew and multiplied, until every cloud-bar stood rimmed beneath with vague rosy dapples of light.

Then, with a curious suddenness, these myriad spots of faint colour glowed up everywhere into clear, soft crimson, dyeing the whole heaven in a fiery lustre, and changing the lake of milk-white mist below into a lake of rich red wine. Just for one radiant, transforming moment. And then the whole eastern sky as suddenly paled down again into sober, sombre grey upon silver, with the one central, ever-strengthening zone of gleaming, snow-pure white.

But "red sky in the morning" does not always mean a rainy day to follow. The rule has one exception—invariable, as far as I know—and this is when the morning red is followed by a clear yellow sunrise; the red rain-roses nullified by the true sun-flowers of gold. Thus it came about this

silent, shrouded autumn morning. Presently, far behind the smoke-grey trellis of eastern cloud, a sudden fleck of amber showed in the silver void. Another and another fleck shot into view, until the whole east was gloriously littered with them as by innumerable floating golden feathers, and the snow-pure, ultimate air warmed into azure scarce discernible at the earth-line but tenderly deep above. Then I saw that a second vertical grille of cloud, almost the exact counterpart of the first, yet infinitely more remote, stood in the heaven, and that the sudden shoal of amber sunbeams had been caught in this as in a trammel-net suspended in the far-off skies.

Moment after moment the glory grew, above and below. The fog-bound earth took the fever of it from the golden morning, and lit up beacon fires on every hill. The tree-clumps, standing breast-high in the mist of the valley, turned to golden islands in a golden sea. Behind me, in the dew-drenched wood, a wren began her simple twittering melody as though to shame the silence of greater singers. A line of black rooks swept noisily across the resplendent sky. The first direct ray of sunshine struck over the shrouded valley, drawing, as it seemed, an instant deep note from something behind me. Turning, I saw a great ivy-tod in full bloom already besieged by countless insects all steeped in the gorgeous sun-flower hue—in the golden blossom, “golden bees making gold instead of honey.”

There is only one time in all the year when the country lanes are thronged with flowers, and yet almost destitute of the murmur and glitter of insect-life.



As you stand looking down the long, winding vista of elm-fringed road, its green verges still bright as ever with yarrow and scabious, purple knapweed and golden camomile, not a butterfly stirs from end to end, nor a bee drones in the wayside blossom. A week ago the lane was alive with every sort of minute winged creation, but to-day, though the morning is just as sunny and mild and still, all have mysteriously vanished. These past warm days have brought the ivy of the whole countryside into full bloom, and butterflies and bees, with every tiny atom that can fly or crawl, have hastened to the feast.

And yet, though the flowery borders of the lane are mute for a season, there is a richer volume of music than ever resounding overhead. As you wander through the sun-barred way, every ivy-clad elm-trunk that you pass hums like a telegraph post in a gale. Where several trees stand close together, the sound attains a surprising depth and intensity.

The whole mass of ivy is covered with gold-green clusters of blossom, each besieged by a scrambling horde. Honey-bees and wasps mainly; black and yellow furred bumble-bees by the score; great shining bluebottles, weaned for the nonce of their penchant towards carrion; hundreds of creatures whose existence you never even dreamed of—flies with bodies of chequered mother-of-pearl; flies half-crimson and half-shimmering emerald, lean, elongated creatures like threads of green or amber knitting silk; and, mingling with all, great, gorgeous butterflies, tortoiseshells and painted ladies and red admirals, their brilliant wings showing in the sunlight like the sails of a fleet of

pleasure yachts veering together over a sparkling summer sea.

Yet there is a vein of sombre, even tragic, circumstance about this vision of stirring life and prosperity which the time of the ivy's blooming brings to the countryside with every October. As the crowd of insects hustles together, contending for the sweets, the sepals and anthers of the flowers are disengaged, and a fine green drift continuously floats down through the sunny air. For yards round each tree the roadway is soon littered deep with these particles.

But many of them are caught by the spider-webs that fill the hedgerows underneath. Every web now, at ordinary times almost invisible, stands out the most conspicuous object of the laneside. When the heavy autumn dews load the spider-webs with glittering water-beads—each bead a warning signal that the silliest midge can understand—the spiders must fain go hungry until the sun has drunk the webs dry, bringing back their invisibility and usefulness together. But this clinging litter from the ivy spoils the webs for ever as an effective snare. There is nothing for it but to wait fasting till the shower is over for the day, and then to cut the useless cumbered net adrift, and weave anew.

When the may-blossom season has been particularly fine, it is sure to bring a wonderful berry-harvest in its train, and the hedgerows to-day are flushed with a richer, deeper red than any but the oldest of us can match from memory.

But the hawthorn-fruit, for all its exceptional abundance, makes up only half the brave show. The hips are almost as plentiful, and even brighter



of hue. The holly everywhere is full of great clusters of berries, just reaching their authentic shade of true vermilion. Black-bryony drapes the hedge with scarlet and green, while the red-bryony hangs out necklaces like threaded cherries, ranging from pale yellow to deepest claret. The nightshade berries, softest and richest red of all, glow in every thicket, and up against the blue sky there are showers of rose-pink spindle-fruits, like cleft satin cushions, with a bead of vivid orange nestling in the heart of each.

The old saying, that an abundant berry-harvest means a hard winter to come, is, in common experience, just as often refuted as confirmed by fact. But whether the wild birds' larder be well or ill provided, the season severe or mild, there is sure to be enacted one very interesting manœuvre during the lean months to come. Though the whole winter's store is now visibly thrown open, and every creature free to squander the good things as it will, the supply is never actually thus dissipated, but is always carefully husbanded—rationed out, as it were—by the plants themselves.

The secret lies partly in the fact that the berries ripen successionally, and partly in their varying degrees of attractiveness to the birds. The hawthorn, however, is an exception to this law. The whole may-berry harvest of a district seems to arrive at edible condition at much the same time, and rapidly disappears, being as much wasted as consumed by the feathered flocks that are now beginning to range the countryside everywhere.

But the berries next in favour with the birds, the great scarlet hips, warn off the voracious improvident crew by a very ingenious device.

Though all take on the hue of ripeness from the beginning, each berry preserves an adamant quality, impregnable to the strongest bill, until the moment of full maturity is reached, when the whole fruit suddenly softens into a juicy pulp. Thus a regular proportion of the rose-berries is daily released for consumption throughout the entire winter.

The holly-bushes keep themselves in reserve as a late supply on a different but equally effective plan. As holly-berries are fairly soft at all times, and of so conspicuous a colour, they would fall an early prey to the hungry hordes, except for the fact that, though nutritious, they are decidedly unpalatable. Holly-berries are only eaten by birds as a last resort.

In the same way we owe the plenitude of berried mistletoe at Christmas to the fact that this wild fruit is of such an obstinately glutinous nature that none of the smaller birds can deal with it, nor, indeed, any of the larger, except it be swallowed whole.

Against the old cider-house was reared a very mountain of apples, no less; and wagons were continually arriving, bringing more and more.

It was apple-harvest time, and every able-bodied soul on the farmstead was out in the orchards helping to gather in the fruit.

There are many things about Devonshire cider-making—at least, the old-fashioned way of it—that strike the unconvertant looker-on with wonder, even perhaps with a little dismay. This ancient crushing-house, in use at the apple-farm for generations, manifestly harbours the accumu-



lated litter and dusty cobwebs of ages, the pulping-gear and vats and troughs are black with long service, the old stone-and-thatch building is dark and dank as the grave.

Also the apples are left to lie under the trees too long, one would say, after picking; the most casual glance detects a large proportion of rotting fruit among them; and, undeniably, a vast deal of earth and odd debris gets carried in with them to the crush.

But the scene in the old cider-house is picturesque enough. In one shadowy bay, a placid old horse is trudging eternally round in a circle, communicating the necessary motion to the crushing-gear. Above the mill is a great, square aperture in the wall, through which pours a constant, thudding torrent of apples thrown in from the mountain-heap outside. The ancient machinery makes an incessant grinding, creaking tumult, and the horse's hoofs a low thunder on the earthen floor. The air of the place is heavy with sweet, tense vapour from the fermenting cider in the long row of vats. Within, there is an unending deep, slow burr of Devon tongues; and without, a cackle of poultry and lowing of kine in the adjacent farmyard—all just as it has been perhaps for unnumbered centuries gone by.

Tucked away in some dim, steamy, fragrant corner of the building, out of the way of the busy throng, where I have inveigled the old farmer into a few moments' talk, I soon begin to learn things about apples and cider-making I had little dreamed of before. The quality of Devon cider (he tells me) has been deteriorating for many years past, and must still further decline in the future

The reason for this is that the old, small cider apples—the Butter-Boxes and Smack-my-Girdles and Beckington Greys, and all the rest of the ancient sorts—are steadily going out of cultivation. As the old trees wear out or fall, only the larger table-apple kinds are being planted in their place, as it pays much better to grow these, seeing that they fetch four times the market price. Eventually the small, heavy-cored cider apples must become extinct, and the cider will be made chiefly from the windfalls and throw-outs of the larger varieties. The quality of cider, it seems, depends on the cores: the more cores that go into the mash, the choicer the cider will be; so the Devon cider of the future will bear no comparison with the older brew.

There are two strange sounds breaking the quiet of the riverside woods to-day.

The one is a crisp, low, sibilant note, endlessly yet intermittently repeated, and, though so subdued, yet curiously distinct in the hush of the keen, bright, frosty morning.

The soft, rustling tones come and go, now singly one after the other, true as the beat of a clock, and now in urging, overtripping medleys of quiet sound, as if a sudden flow of wind were sweeping the tangle of foliage, though not a breath of air moves under the violet sky.

The frost of a single night has worked this strange thing upon the ash-trees, as hard frost always does, coming thus early in the season. Yesterday the trees stood up here and there in the woodland clothed to their summits in verdure, fresh almost as in its summer prime. To-day the



great ash-sprays, albeit green as ever, are breaking away wholesale, and falling to earth with that curious rustling sound to be heard now, near and far, in every wood. In a few days the ashes will have shed their whole garniture of leaves.

The other sound which so strangely breaks in upon the hush and stillness of the riverside wood is very different in character. The sound is like the incessant ringing of innumerable tiny bells. It is heard only by the waterside, where the great oaks stretch their mammoth branches far out over the river's glassy flow. Like the sound of the falling ash-sprays, it comes by fits and starts, and then in whole torrents of plashing sound together; and again in single, rhythmic tones, as though the river were one vast campanile and a solitary ringer for ever passing idly from cord to cord.

What he stands listening to now, in the sunny quiet of the autumn morning, may well puzzle one unused to being out-of-doors in the country at all seasons, unless he has learned to take into account what sudden changes these first sharp October frosts work upon all growing things. And here is one of the simplest, yet most telling, in nature's mysteries of music. Clear and sweet in the calm morning air, the melody ripples on, every varying its pace and depth and quality; and until one actually goes to the river's brink and sees the fat green acorns incessantly dropping, each, as it touches the water, striking out its own pure sweet note, it is hard to believe that such a bewilderingly beautiful effect can be wrought by so slight a means. The overnight's frost has loosened the full-grown acorns in their cups—that is all. And now, under the touch of the

sunshine, they are letting go their last frail anchorage, and giving the drowsy old river a song for its daytime dreams.

In the hedgerows now, the spiders are all in pairs; every spinning Jill with her courting Jack hovering somewhere in the leafy background, though often hard to see.

You may know the male spider by his longer, leaner body, his bristly rufous legs, and the curious fact that he carries before him a pair of curved, club-ended feelers, for all the world as if he were equipped for a boxing-match.

And for him it is indeed an unpeaceful, often perilous business—this annually recurring impulse of his to go a-courting. Whether it be true or not that the female spider brings the honeymoon to a close by devouring her mate, I do not know; I have never witnessed the act. But it is true enough that, at this time, the females are all in a moodish, overwrought state; and the males, though incontrollably obsessed of a desire for their company, are nevertheless filled with an unmistakable dread.

Wandering along the hedgerow on any of these calm, sunny autumn mornings, you see plenty of the female spiders—who alone spin the webs—sitting motionless in the centre of their snares; but the males are not easy to discover on a casual survey. Yet, with a little patient watching, one will presently be observed moving cautiously from his ambush under a leaf, and setting one foot timorously on the outermost strand of the web.

Though his touch is so light, the female at once shows her knowledge of his advent by a start and a sort of bridling movement, but otherwise as yet



retains her inert, indifferent mien. Venturing over the net by slow degrees, each step obviously as much impeded by abject fear as impelled by desire, the male draws near; until at last, becoming suddenly bold, he makes a little headlong rush towards the coveted prize.

Then one of two things immediately happens. Either the female turns upon the intruder like a very tigress, and he is off again into ambush with the speed of light; or she herself flees, leading him a giddy, tortuous dance through the surrounding foliage that may last for minutes together.

But it always seems to end in one way. Sooner or later the pursuing male tires and falls to the rear, stopping at last dead-beat, and going usually to crouch under the nearest leaf. The female stops also, and thus they remain for another minute or so eyeing each other from afar.

Presently you note that the female spider is getting restive. She gives herself a coquettish twirl or two, and then gently creeps towards her suitor, he now in his turn playing the chilly indifferent game, but evidently watching her approach with the same apprehension leavening his desire. She draws so near as almost to touch him, when suddenly she whirls round, and in a moment they are off once more together on the old interminable love-chase.

If one lives near to wood or forest, sound sleep is not easy to come by on these still October nights.

There are so many furred or feathered creatures alert and calling to each other far and near; and the voices one hears on warm nights differ essentially from those that keep one waking on nights

of chill. Warm nights in October are generally cloudy and impenetrably dark, while cold nights are often crystal-clear. If you did not feel the warm air stealing over the face as you lie listening near the open window, you would know the mild western weather still held by the fact that the little brown owls are challenging each other everywhere round the old house. Day or night the cry of the little owl is a sure index of the times. Where he gets to in frost-bound seasons is hard to say. But his shrill wild note, that echoes so continuously round the village gardens on these tepid, muggy nights, is almost never heard in weather that is cold and clear.

On frosty nights of flinching starshine or stark serenity of moonlit chill, it is the great brown owl alone that fills the autumn quiet with her hollow music. Of all eerie sounds that ever came from throat of bird, this is the most arresting. Traditional representations of the cry do not help one much in conveying an impression of it. The ancient "To-whit, To-who" is hopelessly far from the truth. The brown wood-owl's note is more like the winding of a great hunting-horn, loud and wild and free, yet full of a winsome, deliberate harmony, sustained, maybe, for hours together.

The night that is just gone rang with the fearsome, sweet, unhurried sound from its first darkness through to earliest blink of dawn. Now and again, too, a curlew went over with her weird, harsh, jangling cry. And once a far-away whimpering chorus grew into earshot, and across the moon's dim, half-averted face, incredibly far above, a line of dark forms sped like a flight of



shaftless arrowheads—wild geese, perhaps, on their great annual trek to the meres of some remote and unknown land.

But the strangest sound of all, on these tense, breathless autumn nights, is the calling of the red deer in the forest-land beyond the thread of glittering silver that marks the river's course.

At any other time of year one may wander through the leafy fastnesses for miles, and get no more than a glimpse of the herd careering over the next hill. But this is the "Time of the Roaring," the brief love-making season for the red deer, and one goes to the forest at one's peril. The hinds are harmless enough, huddled together timorously here and there in the open glades. But the stags are all mad with jealousy, spending every moment of daylight and darkness bellowing savage defiance at each other from opposing hill-crests.

Away on the hill-farm, the threshing-mill has been humming all day long, and now, in the serene golden light of evening, the deep, quiet voice of it holds the ear as persistently as ever.

Looking up towards the farm, you note that the three or four corn-ricks silhouetted against the sky for weeks past have vanished, all but a single inconsiderable stump, and that a great mountain-heap of straw has risen hard by. Obviously the hired threshing-gang is working late, so as to finish the job before dusk, and be off to the next farm with the earliest grey of morning.

It is the fashion to deplore the use of power-mechanism in agriculture as destructive of the old æsthetic country spirit. But, in this regard,

the steam threshing-machine, at least, has given more than it has taken away. When they are threshing at the hill-farm on these bright, still autumn days, the whole village is pervaded by a soft, continuous music of a syren-like charm impossible to resist.

Hour after hour the rich, quiet, solemn voice dwells on, unceasing yet ever varied in pitch and tone and volume, rising now into a grand, sweet organ-peal, and now subsiding into a low, mellow tenor note with the whisper of the wind in it, though not a breath moves under the violet sky. And through it all, the engine beats steady time—a measured throb that ever breaks the music into low ripples as it comes stealing down the green hillside. And now and again, bringing the artistic cesura into the line, a sudden high note as of a vast sheet of silver-foil incontinently shaken—the song of the great, flapping, erratic leather-belt linking up the two monstrous machines.

The evening light droops dimmer and more richly golden. In the east the night-blue is climbing up the steep of the sky, and one bright flinching star-point has already broken through. Over darkling meadow and wood and down, an indescribable, unearthly stillness broods. You come out into the deserted village street, and look towards the hill-top, where the white plume of steam from the busy engine is alone discernible under the failing light.

In the intense quietude, the song of the threshing-machine seems louder and clearer than ever. But you know, with darkness so near, there can be only a few more sheaves to put through the mill; and then must come what you have been



waiting for—what indeed any true country-lover would wait a long hour to hear.

Sweet as is the song of the threshing-mill heard all through a calm sun-bright October day, it is its last long-drawn-out appeal that sums up, interprets, its whole mysterious beauty. And now this comes to you over the intervening zone of owl-haunted wood and field. First you see the steam shut off, and then the whole contrivance begins to slow down to a halt.

Every stage in this deliberate process is marked by a change in the rich tranquil symphony. Note by note, each tone quieter and more leisurely, the music falls through an entire double octave of the scale, until it dies away at last in the profoundest, softest bass.





THE ELEVENTH MONTH  
NOVEMBER





# THE ELEVENTH MONTH

## NOVEMBER

"Red November"—Rook-life in autumn—Winter on the downs—The winter-song of the hives—Little wonders of the wayside—Thrush-song in November—The promise of autumn.

**I**N the calm November sunshine it is difficult to believe that only yesterday the north-east wind was roaring in the tree-tops under a bleak, drab sky, and the air full of careering snowflakes or icy sleet that drove upon the face like scraps of jagged iron.

Only the bare ash-trees stand in the wood to-day, mute witnesses of the wintry raid gone by. It is doubtful whether one in a score, even among country-folk bred and born, has ever seen the ash in its full autumnal dress. Pass beneath any of the naked trees to-day, and you tread ankle-deep in fallen leaf-sprays of richest seaweed brown. A tree clad in that softly lurid colour would arrest the eye in any prospect, even in red November.

But it is nearly always in this wise with the ash. For weeks past the oak woods have been bronzing, and the beeches taking on a warm russet, and the maples flushing scarlet, and the elms hanging out banners of gold. Only the ash, of all forest-trees, has withstood October's insidious alchemy, and has kept its green summer robe inviolate to the last. But there comes the inevitable cold snap as November draws on.

The first sharp frost begins the work, and the rough wind does the rest. One morning the ash stands green as in days of June: the next, every spray is cast to earth, littering the whole wagon-way inches deep in emerald.

But the green road lasts only an hour or two. This mild still morning, when the sunshine lies like liquid amber in all the crevices of the hills, and the thrushes are beginning to remember old songs, the fleeting colour has already vanished. Bare grey branches stretch overhead against the blue sky, every slender twig beaded thick with coal-black buds. When the hot sun of noon has contrived to rouse the slumbering zephyrs, you shall hear the authentic voice of winter again—the song of the wind through naked boughs, while yet no other tree has let fall a tithe of its ruddy foliage.

But of a truth, red November makes good its right to the ancient name only in a single season here and there within a decade. All depends on the weather. If the rough gales and the frosts forbear, the beech woods will burn on for weeks to come, and every elm will be a flame to light the woodland way. In certain favoured seasons a few of the more sheltered oaks, and most of the young beech saplings, will retain their whole panoply of brown leaves all the winter through. Even strong winds, so that the frosts abstain, will not baulk November of its traditional colouring.

Every morning now, the first token of wild life astir in the world is the clamour of the rooks as they drift over the sleeping village hundreds strong high up against the misty November sky.

Coming out into the garden to look up at them



in the first silvery gleam of dawn, you find it hard to distinguish in the outset exactly what is going forward. Though the whole vast multitude is gradually veering towards the eastward light, the birds individually seem to be facing and moving all ways. Scarce a flutter of a wing is to be seen. The whole ceaseless gyration of the throng is maintained almost entirely by slow circles and spirals performed by each bird, the combined effect being that of an intricate dark pattern woven upon the faint frosty blue of the sky.

And all the time, this strange sound, so deliberate yet so forceful, fills the air—the common purpose, whatever it be, voiced by this great surging melody; as you stand listening and wondering at the depth and volume of the sound, and the immensity of the streaming host, sight and sound pass over together—in a minute or two both have dwindled away into the far silence of the lowlands, and the sun pours over the hill-top; the milk-white autumn morning is suddenly transfixed by a thousand flashing golden swords.

This great travel-song of the rooks marks the beginning of every day of open weather in November. But it is not a sunrise chorus alone; scarce an hour of the day goes by without the like scene being enacted. The whole countryside seems to be swept by these wandering battalions of the skies, nearly always soaring at a great height, and coming from no point of the compass in particular; ever observing the same strange method of advancement—a steady, gradual progress of the entire company in one definite direction, yet incessant variance in individual flight, so that, at all times, a good half of the throng

may be circling and swaying on an opposite course. So long as the mild November weather lasts, the whole rook-population of the country seems to be restless and capriciously astir as bees at swarming-time.

Though, far below in the valley, the white sea-fog still hides all the village but its glittering steeple-vane from view, here in the heart of the downs the calm clear morning sunshine is filling the dew-drenched grass with a myriad burning points of rainbow light.

Those who know downland only in summertime never really see it in all its subtle beauty and mystery. It is in winter, and then only on these rare days of utter calm following frosty nights, that one gets to know what space and altitude—limitless sunshine and blue sky—unbroken day-long solitude—mile upon mile of green hill and dale, every dew-soaked tussock a twirling kaleidoscope of shining gems—air like wine—and interminable strains of sweet, quiet music pervading earth and heaven—can together signify in the solace and refreshment of weary workaday men.

But it is the music of the downs in wintertime—the song of the larks and the quiet tolling of the sheep-bells far and near—that chiefly ministers to the need of one escaped from the grey street-crevices of a city. The skylark's song in winter has none of the exalted qualities of summertime. You do not stand for long minutes together straining sight and hearing up into the remote blue regions of space, hearkening and wondering how such a very cascade of song could come from so tiny a singer. Even on such days as this, the lark seldom ventures far from the green earth.



His winter song is but a moment's melody—you see a sudden dark, flickering atom sidling up a few yards into the sunlight, and hear an instant's music flung with merry abandon into the crisp, keen air; but the next instant the lark drops like a stone, and the song is done. Yet in a moment another minstrel has taken up the strain. All the morning through, and hour by hour, if you will, you can time your step to its jolly roundelay.

The sheep-bells further a different human need. Theirs is not to quicken, but to heal. Small wonder that shepherds are, tribally, ruminative placid folk, seeing that their lives are passed in such an environment of Ariel music.

Listen to the drowsy symphony now, as the flock drifts slowly across the combe from hill to hill half a mile from where you stand. Though the sheep look only like tufts of grey thistledown upon the green, every sound they make is clearly borne up to you through the serene, pure air. The quiet music lifts and falls, now in grand sweet chords, high or low, as the great iron wether-bells or the little tinkling bronze castlings happen to chime together; and now in long wavering rills of soft notes chasing each other up and down the scale. South Down bell-music is the very charm-stuff against all civic fret and care.

Strangers traversing the village street—if it be noon, and the winter's day sunny and still—seldom get past the corner by the bee-garden without stopping short to gaze about them wonderingly.

There is a mysterious sound upon the air, a rich, insistent, throbbing music, that might be

the droning of one of the great pedal-pipes of a cathedral organ heard afar. But where it comes from is hardly ever guessed. The old lichened wall, with its coping of gold-green moss, cuts off all view of the hives, with their winged legions out for their daily noontide cleansing-flight. Generally, after a long, but fruitless, peering-about for a solution of the mystery, and a final questioning stare at the blue sky, the stranger passes on, lured up-street, maybe, by the welcoming sign of the inn, yet as often assuredly by the syren-chime of the smithy anvil, the only other sound that breaks the silence of the winter's day.

Bee-masters have this great good thing conceded by Providence to their ancient calling—on almost any day in winter, if the sun shines bright and the hives are in a sheltered nook, they have only to loiter out into their bee-gardens to bring back summer's most joyous music at a stroke.

It is not for nothing that the honey-bee, almost alone among winged insects, has been denied the boon of hibernation. She lies up quietly enough, sometimes for weeks on end, during the worst inclemencies of frost. The whole winter through, save in abnormally mild seasons, every hive is as still as a catacomb except at this magic noontide hour on days of sunny calm. And then an astonishing thing suddenly comes to pass. One moment the drowsy golden silence of the bee-garden seems as profound, as inviolable, as though the village lay full fathom five down at the bottom of a golden sea. And the next moment it is as if a *réveillé-trump* had sounded simultaneously in every bee-dwelling, to rouse the slumberers.

Shining brown atoms of life begin to appear on



each threshold, and crystal vanes are everywhere unfurled. A thousand harp-strings begin to sound as one. In a few short minutes every hive is the centre of a little, hovering, swirling cloud of misty light made up of the scintillations from innumerable wings, and the song has grown to a very hurricane of music.

If the limpid glory of the morning endure, the symphony holds on at its fullest perhaps for a quarter of an hour, and then it dies gradually down until the last of the airy roysterers has got back snug and warm to the cosy cluster within the hive. But if the sunlight be dimmed, even though only for an instant, the song is like to end almost as abruptly as it started—the old quietude comes back to the bee-garden, treading hard upon the heels of its loudest, most joyous strain.

The morning sunbeams, slanting across the lane, turn the hedgerow into one long heaving billow of silver light.

Wild clematis, or "Old Man's Beard," so little regarded in summertime, is easily the dominant note among wayside vegetation in November. The berries of thorn and briar and holly glow with rich colour, and the autumn leaves—fallen, falling, or still holding to their frail anchorage aloft—steep the countryside in a mirage of gold. But it is all only reflected, borrowed glory. The clematis alone seems to give out light of itself. With its pale green wreaths of foliage and inconspicuous blossom, you have passed this way a hundred times, giving it scarce a glance. But now, in its full winter garb, it overrides everything. From end to end of the lane, all colour, even the

brightest, goes down before its dazzling snow-pure lustre.

The privet is another of the common laneside plants which are seldom noticed in the throng and press of summer, yet which, in autumn, take to themselves predominant traits.

In the privet-berry, the quality that makes you stop to look at its prim, glittering clusters now, is probably unique. One speaks of the sloe as a black fruit, but it is really blue. The blackberry, even at its ripest, is no more than a deep purple. But the privet-berry is blackness, pure, unqualified—perhaps the blackest thing in living creation on this side of the world. The close-knit pyramids of berries make spots of unfathomable darkness set in the labyrinth of sunlit amber and russet and crimson, with all the telling effect of the old-time patch on a lady's face.

But perhaps the most curious instance of this autumnal exaltation of summer's unconsidered things, is to be found in the spindle-tree. The spindle, with its attenuated structure, its light and diffident foliage, and flowers of meanly meagre stamp, passes absolutely unnoticed even in a crowd of the humblest woodland growths. Yet look at it now, lighting up the whole thicket as with rose-red flame. Each tiny floret of dingy white, scarce marked in the springtime, has changed into a pentaform casket covered with pink satin, and this, springing open like a star-trap, has pushed forth five great ovules of vivid orange—orange and rich rose-red, the whole tree standing out a mass of colour where a few months back its very existence was known only to a few wood-haunting moths and bees.



There's the song-thrush singing, perched on the outermost twig of the elm-branch overreaching the lane—a coal-black spot on the grey November sky. He has been sitting there and singing in desultory fashion all the dim, quiet morning through; now and then flying off for a minute or so, but always returning sooner or later to the same lofty perch, and beginning again the same soft deliberate melody.

Song-thrush music in November has little resemblance to the rippling, careless, joyful song of April days. The singer is only just getting back to his work after the long summer and autumn silence, and as yet he lacks artistic confidence and verve.

A minute ago a missel-thrush tuned up in the riverside alders, and his song, though brief, was in no wise different from that of any other time. Just the same hailing, undulating sound, four or five notes of indifferent quality following each other in the same vapid fashion and endlessly reiterated whether the month be December or May. But the music of the song-thrush, more perhaps than that of any other bird, is curiously affected by times and seasons.

On these brooding, silent days in late autumn, when the face of winter is beginning to show grizzly and dour through the fast thinning woods, the thrush gives over much of his characteristic love of repetition—a mere heterogeneous piling up of melodious sounds—and his song becomes a real connected and ordered theme.

Listen to him now as he sits motionless on his solitary perch under the gloom and quiet of the windless morning. From afar, the song seemed to

be a succession of isolated stanzas, going off like minute-guns in the muffled, dead-still air. But standing close under the elm-branch where he perches, you soon find out that these intervals are seldom really mute. There is a little soft inward song with almost a blackbird quality of sedateness that thrushes in November love to alternate with their louder, more authentic strains.

If the bird were not there plain to your eyes, and unmistakably a song-thrush, you might humour the fancy that a blackbird was breaking the hitherto inviolable tradition of his race, and altruistically tuning his pipe to suit the need of lean times, and not, as he ever does, merely gilding the refined gold of summer's season.

This quiet deliberate melody of the song-thrush, characteristic of the times, is well worth study, for it is incomparably the finest thing he does. You may never hear the beginning of the song, so softly is it uttered, but it grows and gathers in the still air with an indescribably winning insistence—sweet silver-bright stanzas following each other like the slowly-paid-out beads of a rosary, each bead of rarer craftsmanship than the last.

As the days shorten, the songs of the thrushes lengthen. From the single rare note, heard on some warm, showery daybreak at the beginning of the month, and then not again, perhaps, for days together, the song-thrush's clear pipe soon becomes an integral part of the morning's melody.

To one abroad on these mist-shrouded November dawns, when nothing of earth or sky can be seen but a shining white vacuity above and below, and nothing heard at first but the steady



drip of moisture from the water-logged trees, it is almost startling to hear the thrush set up her merry tune. She makes no preamble, but suddenly hurls a silver javelin of song across the lane, and follows it by another and another until the whole silent valley echoes to the music. A wren is sure to come next, with her simple, high-pitched, twittering refrain; and then the robins join in one by one, quietly, and, as it were, under their breath.

Mavis and wren and robin first. And then, almost always, the shrill, uncanny cry of a little brown owl, either ending or beginning his foray, for he hunts by day as well as by night. The wailing staccato travels round meadow and wood, having, in the glittering miasma of the morning, a strange, ventriloquial quality, so that one can never be sure of its distance or direction. Starlings begin to whistle and cluck and wheeze in the deep of the wood, and in the hedgerows, as you go along, innumerable tiny wings are astir amidst an incessant pattering cascade of water-drops.

In summertime the road through the wood is a white road, rippling away between verges of mossy green overhung with flowers of every conceivable hue, flower-cumbered sunshine and flower-thronged shade, until, afar off, it narrows to a mere silver thread where it tops the hill and comes to a sudden end against the blue.

But now, as you stand looking through the tunnel of beech wood with the elm-grove beyond, to the far-away brightness of the open lane, you mark how all its whiteness has vanished under a thick carpet of fallen leaves—red in the beech

wood, gold under the elms, and gold again on the open road, but of a sadder, quieter tinge, where the shrill, inconstant wind is stripping the fading maple-leaves from the hedges and wafting them like yellow butterflies across the way.

Once these early keen autumnal frosts have fastened their grip upon the greenery of wood and hedgerow, it is wonderful how swiftly the autumn colours come. Far and near the country seems already to have broken out into a vast-spreading conflagration—zones of sheer flame where the great topping elms fill the valleys, and whole provinces of sullen, smouldering fire where the beech woods climb the steepes.

Loitering through the old lane where the great beeches crowd about it most densely, you gaze up and see myriads of red leaves blotting out all vision of the sky, and millions more underfoot, every slow step drawing from them a soft, sibilant music that is the very voice of glad retrospect on summer's greenness and gladder harking forward to summers yet to come. All about you the dim air is full of sidling, eddying, but ever descending discs of ruddy light—the red rain of the falling leaves. But whether falling, or fallen, or still holding valiantly aloft, for every red leaf there is a new-born bud up there, packed full of promise for next year's life, its swelling growth, indeed, the true cause of each autumn's leaf-fall.

It is difficult to realise this fact with an icy wind incessantly calling, calling, "change and decay on all around I see"; the north wind is always for dirges and requiems, in or out of season. But once grasped, all taint of sadness is banished from autumn for ever. The scenery is



being shifted upon the earth's stage—that is all. Summer's great act is ended. The autumnal hues are but a gorgeous drop-scene let down for a little space to dazzle and draw the eye while the stage is cleared for the next act in nature's eternal pageant play.





THE TWELFTH MONTH  
DECEMBER





## THE TWELFTH MONTH

### DECEMBER

A song at sunrise—Songs of the wilds—Downland bells—  
Frost flowers—Wind in the reeds—Honey-bees in  
December—Winter moth life—Christmas holly—Winter  
seas—Winter sunsets.

**I**N the dripping apple-bough outside the cottage window, a starling sat singing his queer song of dawn.

Very black and wet he looked against the glimmering silver-foil of the morning sky—just a bedraggled silhouette of a bird but half-awake from his winter roosting-place in the ivy under the eaves. Lying in the grey darkness of the little room, I had heard him go scrambling and rustling out—heard the short quick whirr of his wings as he flew the yard or so to the apple-tree, and the sharp impact of his feet on the cascading bough. He was silent awhile. And then the curious, pondering recitative began. Its first note brought home to me the welcome truth. The long pitiless frost had broken at last. A moment later I was thrusting head and shoulders through the little window, drawing in deep draughts of the precious, soul-warming western air.

Prolonged, inveterate frosty weather silences nearly all the birds supposed to sing the winter through. I had not heard a thrush for a fortnight, and only an occasional half-hearted trill from wren or robin, if the frost-bitten sun contrived a gleam or two at high noon. But to hear

the starling's rare song, and that at first grey light of dawn, could betoken only one event. With something of the bird's own gratefulness and joy at the return of warm, life-favouring weather stirring within me, I knelt at the little casement drinking in balm of air and balm of living music to my heart's content.

To speak of the starling as a singing-bird may well excite the wonder of those who know him in springtime only as the clucking, whistling proletarian of the roof-tops, or in winter sweeping across the countryside in incredible hordes with wild, discordant cry. But there are starlings and starlings, and many a sweet song some of them give at times.

The one in the sodden apple-thicket under my window began his lay this morning with a low, lingering, inward note strangely reminiscent of the nightingale's familiar keening phrase, the slow tolling of a single deep quiet bell that always goes before the sudden objurgatory part of the famous symphony. Then he set to work on a piece inimitably his own, a jumble of rather reedy tenor notes, picked seemingly at random up and down the scale. It was truly a song, nevertheless; and the secret of its fascination lay in its epic power of voicing the common joy of all living, moving things at the break in the long frost—the happy birds calling to each other now across the lanes and fields in ever-increasing medley, the song of running water once more, and again the call of the ploughmen to their jingling teams.

And all through the long, dark, drenching morning a thrush has sung near my open window,



the pure sweet notes beating time for the runnel-music of the pouring eaves.

A country-lover, housebound by such a Noah's flood of steadily cascading water, and oppressed, even a little appalled, by the unending gloom, cannot quite make out at first what the thrush has got to be so merry about; why he sits in the dripping hedgerow carolling out his song hour after hour as though it were a morning in May. The rain drives straight down through the windless, torpid air. You cannot see beyond the end of the village street—wood and field and distant hills all alike whelmed in a formless mist of water. The very tree-tops near at hand are lost in the grey, overlooming pall. And yet the thrush pipes on gaily, even rapturously; his clear, crystal-bright song annihilating the gloom and sadness of the morning, as though he were put there designedly to shame your pessimistic mood and turn your leaden, lagging pen-point into gold as it drives across the page.

And that, assuredly, is as it should be. We get but half the good from a country life—from a deliberate attempt to restore correspondence between human life and that which is called "Nature"—if we do not realise how all natural things, including elemental humankind, work together for mutual aid and furtherance.

The man who treads on a daisy without a pang at heart; he who can tramp the purple moorlands all day long, and see nothing but a little white ball and a distant flag; who can run his boat into a green reed-bower by the riverside, and, lying in leaf-winnowed summer sunlight, dream only of stocks and shares; or he who, listening

to a nightingale in the sweet June darkness, does not get a new notion from the sound, or learn something from the scent of wild roses or the lazy crackle of bursting gorse-pods on sweltering summer days—that man is, of all others, to be pitied.

Wilfully or ignorantly, he has disregarded things that, it is hard to believe, were but set in his path fortuitously. The story of Pippa's random song, and this thrush's careless piping in the gloom and downpour, surely, in their outcome, betray to us the inmost meaning of what we so strangely miscall Happy Chance.

Wild birds' song, and the clear runnel-music from the pouring eaves, all day through until the dark. And now, with the fall of night, both have ceased together, and another voice begins to creep into the drenched solemn stillness out-of-doors.

There seems always something eerie, inopportune, about the wind that slumbers by day, but wakes and flies abroad, like an owl, at night. Normal effort and alertness appear to belong by right to daylight's hours. But nature ever defies our anthropomorphic imputation of proprieties, and now the wind is getting up with a will. Only a faint crepitation at first in the highest tree-tops, within an hour the sound of it has grown into a steady organ-peal, a rich, reverberating harmony, that draws you out into the darkness of the garden to listen, as resistlessly as though you were a ship with all sail spread before the blast.

Wind in winter trees has none of the sibilant, otiose quality of summertime. The bare tree-tops



are like so many strung harps, each twig adding its own clear note to the symphony. This is just a great strong voice halloing in the night; an alarm to be out and doing. Winter winds have always this urging call to action in their sound, infinitely disquieting to certain natures, especially after dark.

But perhaps, of all songs of the open air, that of the sea lays a more intimate stress than any upon human hearts. Never ceasing, ever changing, the sound of the sea—to those who dwell by it—becomes a real, though often unrealised, factor in every mood of life.

Everything in nature has a dominant, but never a single, purpose. Sunshine has a myriad uses beyond its principal one of light-giving. Seeds nourish the birds as well as propagate their kind. The loveliness of a wild-flower generates loveliness in the mind of the human observer, though its main purpose is to draw to it the fertilising bee. And so, when sun and moon and wind unite to stir the ocean into cloud-making, and thence to its chief end of irrigating the earth, there is added to us this great good thing—a constant, yet beautifully inconstant music; which, whether he will or no, whether he receive it consciously or unconsciously, impels every man to life-giving, creative thought.

Little Paul Dombey, sitting in his invalid chair by the sea-shore, and trying to make out what it is the wild waves are always saying, is a type of the many who realise that there is some further, finer meaning in this eternal ocean-melody that peals along our coasts.

True musical art makes the hearer forget the

music, in the reverie it awakens; and this is the quality which is ever present in the song of the sea, giving it its main significance and worth. In calm or storm, there is something in it that answers to every human mood. And perhaps it is its innate joyousness, its invincible optimism, that holds the secret of its fascinating power.

The downs, on these sunless, windless winter days, have a charm known to few, because few ever go to them at this season.

Seen from the wooded, cultivated lowlands they look so mournful and so desolate—just a grey misty, sagging line of hills, far aloft and scarce discernible against the kindred grey of the December sky. On the rich alluvial plain below, one thinks, there are at least hedgerows full of bright-hued berries and silver sheen of clematis, woods already purple and russet with promise of a new year's life, song-thrushes and missels and redbreasts carolling all day long. But what can there be on those bare deserted heights other than negation of life; stark silence, cheerless solitude?

Well, choose the greyest, stillest, gloomiest morning, and set off up the old chalk lane that leads to the downs.

The first thing you realise, after gaining the hill-top and journeying a while over the wide tableland beyond, is that the air has lost its torpidity. There is nothing that can be called wind, yet you move in an atmosphere that is broad awake, full of an indescribable zest and savour, instinct with the very spirit of free, joyous life. And then this greyness and silence, and dour, for-



saken look which the downs bore, viewed from below?—let eyes and ears record the honest truth of what lies now about your path.

There is no thrush and robin-music, which would be as unmeet here as in mid-ocean—for, in its way, downland is as alien to a conventional countryside as it is to the deep sea. But the downs have a melody all their own; year-long, indeed, except in the brief season of lambing-time, when the ewes are down in the farmsteadings. All round you, as you stand in the wide green solitude, the sheep-bells are giving forth their sweet tranquil note.

Though there are peewits winding their shrill horns in every combe, and jays and magpies and furze-chats in every gorse-patch by the way, you neither want nor heed their busy symphony. The sheep-bells are enough. Distance blends the whole volume of sound from each flock into a single, low, soft clamour, lifting and falling, stopping and going on again by turns. But, drawing nearer, you soon realise what ceaseless variety in pitch and tone these old Sussex sheep-bells can encompass, and how truly they interpret the spirit of the scene in which their music is made.

Almost it seems as if the bell-wethers worked in concert designedly. There comes a deep tolling note, measured and slow, from a single bell far up on the hillside; then a tender chord from several smaller bells together, the sound echoed from group to group of the slowly browsing sheep, as if the bells themselves were travelling the still air and chiming as they went. Finally comes a long wavering rill of sound that grows into a veritable storm of music as the whole flock,

moved by some common impulse, sweeps down the combe together.

A moment later, all are still again, and the single, deep-throated bell has the morning to itself once more.

Away from the downs in the white wilderness of the wood, the light is so dim that one can scarce make out the path a dozen yards ahead.

A single night of frost and fog, and all the new-found light-riddled bareness of the winter wood is gone once more. The hoar-frost has gathered incredibly thick upon every twig and branchlet overhead, and upon every bramble and privet-spray and stem of grass beneath. The very leaves of autumn covering the path are changed to discs of pure white velvet. The sheathing frost has doubled and trebled the girth of everything living or dead, stopping the light on every hand and blocking out all vision of the sky, so that, just for this one white, silent, shrouded hour, the wood has got back in all its depth and fullness a ghostly semblance of its summer gloom.

Snow clogs and malforms, imposing a ruthless dead-weight of white upon everything. But the hoar-frost only beautifies whatever it overlays, and its magic touch brings to all alike the illusion of a delicate, lovely inflorescence. They are true flower-forms—these spreading stars and Maltese crosses and multiple rosettes, into which the frost has transmuted every twig and leaf and grass-blade and sprig of herbage in the old wood. But the seeming utter whiteness of it all has no existence in truth. It is but the phantasm of an eye unversed in the discrimination of minutely associated points of colour.



Looking closely, you will soon find out that, in itself, hoar-frost has no whiteness other than the whiteness of scintillating diamond-dust—a myriad infinitesimal sparks of colour, each intensely brilliant atom lost in the glory of its fellows; crimson annihilating emerald, the turquoise obliterating the violet and gold.

A still more curious trait in the nature of these hoar-frost effects, is the method by which their bewildering beauty and variformity are brought about. Nothing is merely enlarged by the dense accretion of the frost; all is recreated into something new and strange. There is no simple envelopment. The hoar-frost takes twig or leaf or grass-blade merely as foundation, starting-point, from which is evolved a fairy structure wholly alien, it may be, to the thing that gave it initial being.

The secret of this original creative power of the hoar-frost lies in the fact that it grows by incessantly adding to itself tiny, microcosmic cubes and prisms of ice. The wonderful frost-flowers are built up in this way exactly as a house is built up of brick or stone.

From the steep riverside bank, nothing of the water can be seen for the dense, intercepting jungle of reeds. Pale dun-brown in colour, and all of a height, the reeds stretch away under the still December sunshine in one unbroken, receding level, that brings up at last against the oak wood on the farther side of the river as a sea is stopped by beetling cliffs.

It is one of those rare times when the garrulous reeds may be said to be silent for once, as well as

still. In the green summertime, though not the faintest breath of air is moving under heaven, there is never absolute silence in the reed-thicket. It is as if the mere fact—of all that congregated verdant growth and rich sappy life—made a sound of its own just discernible to human ear. But, in the slumber-time of winter, still days are really silent days in these mimic forests of reeds.

Standing on the high bank, and looking out over the wide sunlit expanse, I could detect not the slightest sound, strain the ear as I would; nor mark the merest deflection in any of the myriad close-knit stems. The utter silence and the stillness, dwelling on minute after minute, at length took to themselves an oppressive, almost an uncanny, cast.

But these times of perfect, unleavened stillness out-of-doors seldom endure for long; if the season be winter, and the hour verging on towards noon of a sunny day, they may last only a minute or two, and then end as suddenly as they began. It is not often that one hears the wind stop dead—fall like a shot bird—as I heard it a short ten minutes ago. Still more rarely does it come within one's experience to hear it reawaken as suddenly, sound and motion spring up together—rise in a moment, visible and vocal, like a lark leaving the clod and lifting her sudden music to the skies.

Yet so it happened to-day, as I stopped to look over the vast dun plane of riverside reeds, wondering at their silence and stark immobility under the yellow winter sun. I saw and heard the wind returning long before its first rough breath struck upon the cheek. Far away over



the soft, filmy level, a voice was suddenly up-raised in the silence, and a deep cleft as suddenly came in the brown. The hurrying, hustling channels of shadow, lighter and darker by turns, began to chase each other impetuously forward. Little eager whirlpools appeared between the furrows and spun round together in a giddy dance, and great, sombre chasms opened in their path, ruthlessly engulfing them. The brown reed-ocean began to fall into seething sierras of wave-crests, with deep, surging hollows between. And all came driving relentlessly onward, until at last the reed-rampart close by broke under the onslaught, and came shattering down about my ears.

In the village garden, under the bright noon sunshine, singing thrushes and singing bees make the day more like a day in early summer than one at the very nadir of the year.

Those who think of bee-hives as dead, silent things throughout the long English winter are always astounded at the busy life abroad at every break in the frosty weather. For there is no true hibernation in hive-life. The bees merely get together between the combs in a solid phalanx, with their precious queen in their midst; and there they slumber contentedly through the long frost-bound days and nights, rousing ever so little now and then to take what food is necessary to sustain life.

So long as the cold endures, the bee-garden is silent enough, save for the merry thrush-music in the leafless boughs. But with the first breath of southern air, that so often comes up like new life in the darkness of the winter's night when a

change is brewing, a mysterious sound can be heard along the row of hives. Wandering out into the garden then under the flinching silver of the stars, the night air strikes almost hot upon the cheek, and you bring up stock-still at the wonderful new sound that is thrilling in the darkness, as though a great harp-string had been touched ever so gently by an invisible hand.

All bee-masters know the sound, and the cause of it. Every bee in the garden—and there may be ten thousand or more to a hive—is suddenly awake and stirring and telling all her bedfellows that the cold is gone, and the long-awaited "turn of the days" is here at last.

And now, under the warm, still light of cloudless noon, the whole garden is full of scintillating wings, and the morning overladen with a soft, drowsy melody. There is, indeed, no busy, purposeful coming and going as in summer days; no ceaseless streams of bees pouring from the hives and away under the blue sky towards the blossoming clover-fields; and no opposing streams of home-wending bees, so heavily burdened with nectar and golden pollen that they can scarce drag themselves into the hives. The activity to-day is merely for exercise, recreation, bodily easement.

If you watch a single bee just emerging from her dwelling, you will see that she does not lance straight off into the skies, as she would do if the honey-harvest of summer were at its full gathering. She just lifts herself sedately into the air, and, turning, hovers awhile with her head to the hive, as though taking careful stock of it. And then she will sail off into the aerial throng, making



half a dozen deliberate circles and spirals, then a wide, desultory sweep or two round the garden, finally returning to the hive and running in at once, as if glad to get back to its cosy warmth and gloom.

Then there are the winter moths. To carry a lantern into the woods on any of these mild and muggy winter nights, is to get a glimpse into a phase of wild life that the most diligent quest has never yet robbed of all its mystery.

Richness of colour and grace of form in insect, bird or flower are wonderful enough in summer's broad day. Yet their existence is at least understandable if only on the old rash conjecture as being for human ennoblement or delight. But why should the blind winter dark be sown thick with living gems of beauty—winged, wandering jewels that pass and repass through the yellow lantern-glow; shining hovering specks of colour, fiery amber, or dusky gold, or pale moony silver-grey more lustrous than all?

Such a thought must occur to the least imaginative on coming by lamplight into a wood on any of these tepid muffled winter nights, and observing the many moths abroad. Without the lantern, the darkness would be complete; the link-bearer is engulfed, encased in it as a worm that has eaten its way into the heart of a bale of black velvet. And as is the darkness, so the silence. Though, afar off, the wailing note of an owl vexes the secret deep of the wood, and rarely a breath of night-wind draws across the highest tree-tops, the whole wide valley of afforested land seems entirely mute.

Coming to a halt at length, the rhythmic surge

of my feet through the fallen leaves dies down, and there gathers about me in a moment a silence that is almost fearsome in its profundity; I can hear my own heart beating, and the tick of my watch in its fob. And then, long before the little careering atom of smouldering bronze draws into the magic circle of the light, a dull, thrumming note grows on the air. It is a "December" moth—a female, plainly, by her size and breadth of wing—swinging gaily through the golden patch in the Cimmerian darkness: back and through again, ever with the same jaunty, errandless gait. And presently others with her, until the whole circle of light is alive with tiny veering flecks of topaz and amber and sheeny moonstone, and the air throbs with a sound as of elfin music, for all it is but just within the stretch of the intentest ear.

There are other winter moths that may soon be chanced upon in the deep woods and tree-girt lanes, and these stranger still in their habit of life; though, so far as my knowledge takes me, it is only the gloaming-winged "December"—and perhaps only the female at that—which gives out this ineffably soft murmur as it goes.

Such moths as the dun-red Herald, and that known as the "Early," may be already on the wing in certain favoured districts, lured from the chrysalid stage out of due season by the strangely clement times. But the lantern will draw only the fluttering blundering males, for the astonishing reason that it is the males alone which fly. The females of all this mysterious family are equipped with only the merest travesty for wings, entirely useless in flight, and pass their lives hiding among



the twigs of the hedgerows or in crevices of the bark of trees.

Now and again, as I pass along, the light of the lantern just catches on the holly-berries. It is certain now that there will be no lack in English homes—or need be none, at least—of bright-berried holly for the garland-making at Christmas, and it is equally certain that many people, whose only acquaintance with holly is an indoor one at this season, will be noticing how much of its green glossy foliage is without the usual spines.

The holly's overflowing horn of plenty this December is due indirectly to the long-continued mildness of the times. When winter sets in very early, and with unusual severity, the stores of rose and may-berries on the countryside are prematurely exhausted, and the birds must come to the attractive, yet ill-flavoured holly, or starve. But in seasons of mild, open weather, such as has been experienced lately—especially in good blossom years like the present—the plenitude of hips and haws, supplemented by the fact that mild winters delay the crowding of the normally insectivorous birds to the hedgerows for food, has almost wholly kept the holly-berries from depredation.

Sometimes, however, it happens that the holly will bear its scarlet load of fruit untouched till well into December. And then, the hard frosts suddenly setting in, Christmas finds the holly-berries all but gone, the garland makers bereft of their chief supplies.

The absence of prickly leaves, which will probably be observed on some of the most richly and profusely berried holly-boughs gathered for decora-

tion this year, is explained by the circumstance that the older trees have borne exceptionally well this season on their upper branches, so well, in fact, that it has been worth while to climb for their treasure of densely clustered fruit.

If the holly is not a tree that thinks, it is not easy to understand its plan of life in regard to this question of spined and unspined foliage.

The whole plant—bark and leaf and tender twig—is good to eat, as most four-footed creatures know. The young holly saplings have a perilous time of it in natural, unprotected situations, not a tithe of them ever reaching maturity. But where one has chanced to attain such girth and height as to defy the bark-nibbling rabbits it is only to find itself beset with new dangers. Browsing animals would soon strip it of its fleshy, succulent leaves if it did not put on this formidable armament of prickles.

Yet—and here is where the holly-tree seems to make a reasonable proposition of life as opposed to an instinctive one—it grows these prickly defences only to the height normally reached by its larger hungry foes. Above that line the leaves swiftly lose their sharp, strong barbs, and the upper regions of growth bear only smooth, unspined foliage, though there the brilliant-hued berries make a braver show than ever.

White fog, and a white sea-shore, and the sullen waters whispering afar off invisibly on the brink of the low-tide sands.

To realise the utter solitude of the place, one must be here alone on the shrouded winter's morning—alone amidst the white silence above



and below; lifeless, colourless, formless, mute but for the one soft crisping murmur stealing over to you through the void. Walking just where the steep shingle-bank and the rippled sandy levels meet, your footsteps make not the slightest sound in the snow. No single cry of bird, nor audible token of other life, reaches the ear. The dim air is as still as the age-long imprisoned air of a crypt. You seem to be alone on the whole wide earth.

And then the rapt intensity of silence breaks with such a sudden crash and commotion as sends your heart leaping into your cap with the utter surprise of it all. Yet by reason of such a simple, ordinary thing—no more than a hare hiding among the low-tide rocks—what he was doing there on such a morning passes all conjecture—but now, startled at your approach, he is up and off with the speed of light along the precipitous shore, scattering pebbles and snow together uproariously as he goes.

To the eye, through the dense white mist, he is lost almost in a moment. But the clatter of his sudden flight can be followed, ever diminishing, until, perhaps half a mile away, the straining ear loses it finally. The silence shuts down again over the scene as solidly as ever—white fog looming over a white sea-shore, and the sullen waters lipping afar off unseen on the brink of the low-tide sands.

But these portentous phases of the season, albeit seemingly so lasting and profound, are scarce ever more than the passing mood of an hour. Even as you stand wondering and a little awed at the blind hush on everything about you, a change comes in the lilt of distant water-song. The tide

has turned, and the first indriving ripples are beginning to add their eager bell-music to the old, quiet, lisping, listless strain.

And now you can just discern a lightening of the fog around you, a gradual thinning and cleaving far and near, above and below. In a little while, the irregular line of shingled shore to east and west becomes dimly perceptible; a few more minutes, and, looking seaward, you can make out the new foam of oncoming waters, each white curve driving in a little nearer than its fellow before.

Out now over the sloppy, glittering, weed-tressed sands to the very brink of the waters, but just in time to note their intense deep green under the new-found light before the wreaths of white vapour overhead rend and sweep asunder. Suddenly before you a resplendent golden pathway of sunbeams is laid upon the green, stretching right from your very feet to the remote horizon-line—the dim blue trysting-place of sky and sea.

It is not the green earth alone which has her seasons: spring and summer, autumn and winter, are as indubitably written month by month in the skies.

The variances of light and cloud-effect in winter, contrary to the general belief, tend in the main, not towards turbulence and gloom, but rather towards harmony and serenity of hue and form, as all know well who study the skies year in and year out. Calm days at this season, and they are many, seldom pass into other than nights of star-gemmed or moonlit calm—pure tranquillity done in silver-point on azure. And the few really



boisterous winter days—days of resounding wind and black storm-cloud driving helter-skelter over the world—commonly end in a sundown that is just formless, tintured radiance and nothing more ; not a breath of air moving now, nor a trace of cloud showing between darkling earth and darkling sky.

But the day's end most thoroughly characteristic of this spirit of serenity and concord marking the English winter is the kind which so often brings what is called " threatening " weather to a close. The morning light comes late, and in a seemingly tentative, diffident way. All day through great vague masses of cloud stand about in the sky, shifting their station scarce a jot from hour to hour, one would say, but for the ever waxing and waning sunshine about one's path, the incessant dimming and brightening of the distant hills.

But at the sunset hour all the dubiety of the elements vanishes, suddenly knit, as it were, into one set purpose of wonder-weaving. The clouds in the east endlessly divide themselves into ribbons and ripples and trailing garlands and festoons, all sharply, delicately carved out of alabaster, and laid upon a field of pellucid air intensely blue above, but shading down towards the earth-line into soft pure green.

And every fleck of cloud from horizon to zenith is steeped through and through, not with mere colour of fine gold, but with an intolerable glory of golden flame. And each resplendent plume or cresting wavelet of fire has all its edges clear-cut against the living amethyst or emerald of farthermost space.

There is not a trace of sully, incongruous shadow, or of cooler colour, in the whole magnificent array of the sky, nor of one hue merging into another—just a bewilderingly beautiful crazy-pattern of molten amber upon burning blue all alike in its sheer intensity, with the coal-black sierra of wooded earth-line losing itself beneath in a sombre scumpling of rose.

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